



The
Detective
Is Already
Dead 4

nigozyu
Illustration by Umibouzu

4

La detective
está
muerta.

The
Detective
Is Already
Dead

nigozyu

Illustration by Umibouzu



“...Don’t
spring those
vivid images
on me like
that when
I’m not
expecting
it.”

“You really shouldn’t rename your
folders with the titles of complicated-
sounding English dissertations. It’s
really short-sighted.”

“It might work with other
people, but it won’t work
on me. I just thought it
looked interesting, and I
peeked inside.”



“What
I am
trying to
say is...”



Out of nowhere, I felt a soft tug on my jacket sleeve.

“It’s your fault this happened to me.”

In the moonlight, on a sidewalk illuminated by streetlamps, I turned back. Our eyes met.

“I’ll say it as often as I have to: It was your fault I left my room. It’s your fault that I got pulled into all this awful trouble. And also... it’s your fault that I’ve started wanting, just a little, to change the future. All of it. It’s all your fault. And so...”

“Take responsibility, all right?”



"Oh, you're awake."

When I woke from a world of darkness,
I saw a girl's face right next to me.

"...What are you doing, Natsunagi?"

I'd only meant to close my eyes for a
minute, but apparently I'd conked out.

"Watching you. You were snoozing as
peacefully as a baby."

"Don't just get into a bed where a guy's
sleeping like that's normal."

"Did it make your heart skip a beat?"

"Well, being in Siesta's bed with you
is making me sweat, but not for the
reasons you might be thinking."

Oracle

Real Name	Classified
Special Skill	Classified
Occupation	Oracle
Age	16
Nationality	British
Hobby	Online gaming
Dislikes	Going out, Exercise
Always Says	"The world's going to end anyway..."
Code	Do not hope, do not wish, do not rely on

She wears a white robe
and red hakama,
like a Japanese shrine maiden.
In the slowly fading evening light,
the Tuner who guards the world rules
from the top of the clock tower.



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Is Already
Dead

4

nigozyu

Illustration by Umibouzu



New York

Copyright

The Detective Is Already Dead, Vol. 4

nigozyu

Translation by Taylor Engel

Cover art by Umibouzu

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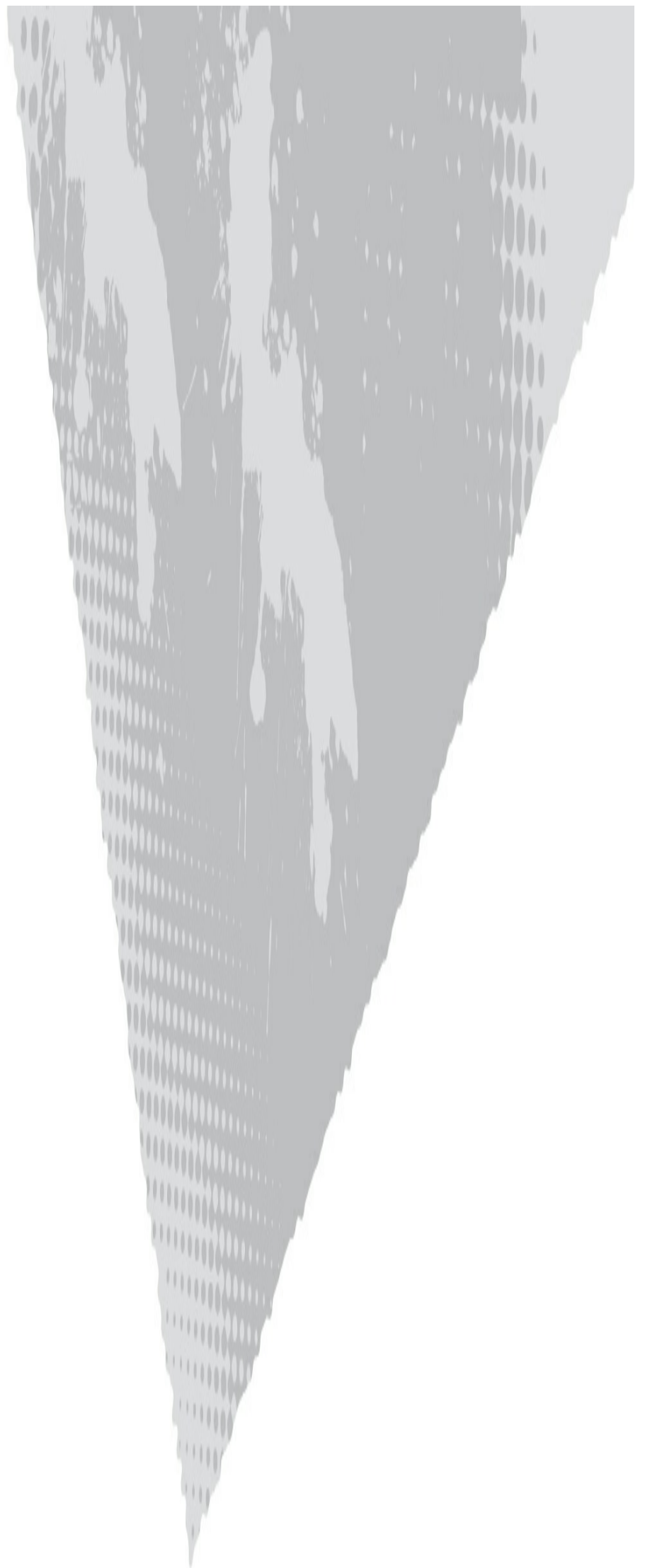
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Prologue, continued

“The helicopter’s here!”

On the coast road, the orange sun was beginning to rise.

Spotting the aircraft in the sky, Charlie turned, shouting toward us.

“Thank goodness. It made it in time...” Sighing with relief, Saikawa sank weakly to the ground next to me.

“Natsunagi, gimme a hand!”

“All right. On three: One, two, three!”

Working in sync, Natsunagi and I gently picked up the wounded girl and moved her to an open space. The helicopter was here to transport her to a hospital.

“—Once again, are you people stupid?”

As Natsunagi and I carried her along, the girl in question looked at us coldly. “You’re worrying too much. I’m only a *robot*.”

The source of that flippant comment was an ace detective with pale silver hair—or rather SIESTA, who’d been created by equipping the detective’s body with an AI.

However, her artificial heart had just been badly damaged in combat, and we’d arranged to have her sent to a certain special facility in the hopes of repairing it. We’d managed that with the help of the redheaded policewoman currently in handcuffs.

“You’ve got a hole in your heart. Just be quiet and do what we tell you.”

“Yes, but Kimihiko, when you manhandle me like this, I break out in goose bumps all—”

“Oh, hey, just listen to all that energy you’ve got! That’s great!”

It’s seriously impressive that she can be this caustic with a straight face. *Now,*

I wonder which detective she takes after? I made eye contact with Natsunagi, and we gently lowered SIESTA to the ground. We just had to wait for the helicopter to land.

“Kimihiro, here,” said SIESTA, whose head was resting on Natsunagi’s lap. I crouched down, and she took an object out of the folds of her clothes, then slipped it into the breast pocket of my jacket.

“SIESTA?” I pressed my hand to the pocket and felt something hard. What in the world—?

“It’s from Mistress Siesta.” Her smile was so gentle you’d never have believed she was a robot. “She told me to give this to you once the four of you had accomplished your tasks. I’m told everything you need to know at this point is in there.” Softly, she put her hand out, placing her palm over my left breast pocket.

“...I see. So this is still part of your job?”

“Yes. And this is the end of the future Mistress Siesta predicted.”

Right, this was as far as it went. Up until now, we’d been on the route Siesta had envisioned.

She would sacrifice herself to pin down a powerful enemy, then make those of us she’d left behind focus on the future by working through our issues. Yeah, that had been truly brilliant direction. It was just like her: the girl ready to resolve incidents before they even happened. But in that case...

“From now on, we’ll do this our way.”

Sorry, but I’m pretty fed up with being manipulated by Siesta all the time.

“Kimizuka, your face looks really evil right now.” Natsunagi smiled a little, while SIESTA rested in her lap.

“I seem to remember you saying you’d be my accomplice.”

“...Ngh, well, I guess I can’t deny that.” Natsunagi looked away. On her cheek, I could see the tracks of the tears she’d just shed.

“SIESTA...”

“It won’t be long now.”

Saikawa and Charlie came over to kneel beside us.

“Yes, I’ll have myself repaired and return someday. More importantly...” As the girls watched her with worry, SIESTA looked straight at them. “Please take care of Mistress Siesta.”

That vow we’d made had been her wish as well.

Even if, in a way, it meant betraying her mistress.

“Yeah, leave it to us. Someday, I swear—”

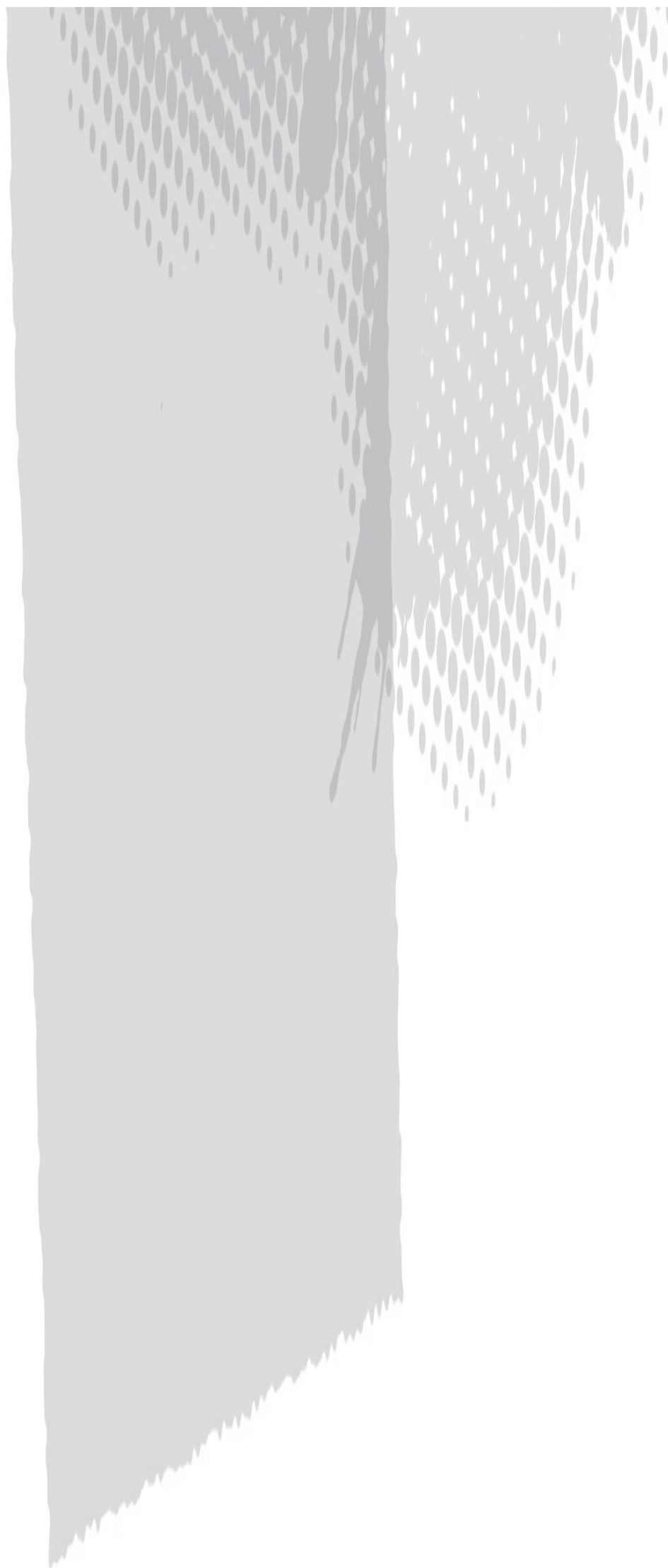
“We’ll bring Siesta back to life.” Natsunagi spoke over me firmly.

“Yes. I leave it in your hands.” SIESTA gave one last soft, relieved smile.

I’ll say it again: The detective is already dead.

I refuse to let it end there, though.

This is the incredible tale of how we’ll transcend the detective’s last wish and overturn the future she planned.



Chapter 1

◆ Don't listen to little girls

Roughly half a day had passed since we made that vow.

“And so I sentence you to twenty thousand years of penal servitude, you damn brat.”

The redheaded police officer leaned in toward me, a cigar clamped between her teeth. She had an ogreish look on her face.

The ogre's name was Fuubi Kase.

She'd called me, which was why I was in her condo on the top floor of a high-rise apartment building in the first place, but...

“...That's not fair. I haven't done anything.”

Exactly what crime was she bawling me out for? She'd driven me back to the big window, with its view out over the city lights, and I snapped at her like a noble Pomeranian confronting a lion.

“You haven't? Ha! Don't make me laugh.” ...Except she wasn't even smiling. “I hate to break it to you, Kimihiko Kimizuka, but you're suspected of breaking the speed limit on a motorcycle, multiple violations of the Firearm and Sword Possession Control Law, assault, bodily injury, and obstructing an officer in the performance of her duties.”

Glaring at me, she pointed at her own right cheek.

Yesterday evening, for reasons I won't get into, Ms. Fuubi and I had squared up and fought. During that fight, I'd decked her... It had been a while since then, but her cheek was apparently still swollen.

“Maybe so, but you put me through quite a bit of hurt, too.”

“And yet you look like you feel great.”

Well, she had a point. Was it a knack for taking a lot of punishment, something I'd picked up because of that *predisposition of mine*? Even my ribs seemed to be fine, and I'd been sure they were broken.

"It's a full house of additional charges, which is why I'm putting you away for life."

"Whoa, wait, call me a lawyer! I have rights!" Desperately, I looked around. I wasn't the only one who'd been summoned to this room. I had three other trusty allies here. "Hey, Natsunagi! You tell her, too..."

"Wow! The bath is huge! Check it out, it's a Jacuzzi!"

For reasons unknown, somewhere in the distance—from the bathroom, specifically—I heard gleeful voices.

"Nagisa, soap up and rinse off first."

Natsunagi was actually taking a bath. With Charlie.

You've gotta be kidding me. What kind of detective doesn't come running when her assistant's in trouble? ...Although I guess there was another one last year who didn't do that, either.

"Honestly. I suppose I have no choice."

When God closes a door, he opens a window, as they say—a girl threw me a lifeline.

"Ms. Kase, could you find it in your heart to forgive Kimizuka?"

It was Yui Saikawa, the super idol. She was sitting at the table by herself, sipping a mug of milk. Ordinarily, I didn't get much respect from her. However, at least mentally, she was the oldest one here, and it looked like she was going to take my side just this once. "Yes, he decked you. But he didn't have a choice. He did it for love."

"Love?"

Ms. Fuubi looked perplexed. So did I.

"Yes, love!"

Saikawa smacked the table and stood up.

“To Kimizuka, Siesta is utterly irreplaceable. It doesn’t matter if you’re a detective or a Tuner, he’ll punch you into next week for her. After all, Kimizuka loves Siesta. He loves her from the bottom of his heart!”

“You wanna die?!”

“Eeeeeek! Kimizuka, you’re scary!”

I had to end that little girl, no matter what. As Saikawa fled, I swore to myself I’d pursue her to the far side of hell.

“Hey, don’t play tag in other people’s apartments. Don’t just use me as a foil for your comedy routine.”

“I called you people here to give you a warning.”

We’d probably gotten the serious bit and the comedy bit out of order, but that’s how things generally go around here.

The four of us were all seated at the table listening to Ms. Fuubi, who sat at the head.

“Nagisa Natsunagi, Yui Saikawa, Charlotte Arisaka Anderson, and Kimihiko Kimizuka. You intend to defy the Tuners and find some other way to defeat Seed. You’re sure that’s what you want to do?”

Her sharp eyes drilled into each of us, one after another.

“Yes, it is,” Natsunagi told her. She gazed straight at Ms. Fuubi without flinching. “We won’t let you kill anyone, and we won’t let anyone be sacrificed. We’ll all smile together, and in the end, we’ll win together. That’s our only goal and our condition for victory.”

Right. We’d launched our adventure that night in order to make that wish come true.

“...Huh.” Ms. Fuubi gave a dissatisfied snort.

Our current enemy was SPES and its leader, Seed. Seed hadn’t been able to completely adapt to Earth’s environment, and he was looking for a human vessel to take over. The leading candidate was an individual who had the power of one of his “seeds,” yet hadn’t developed any side effects from it: Yui Saikawa.

As a Tuner who fought the world's enemies, Ms. Fuubi had tried to indirectly defeat Seed by teaming up with her subordinate Charlie to destroy his vessel—to kill Saikawa. When I'd found out what she was up to, I'd fought her. Natsunagi—and later Charlie, who'd had a change of heart—had teamed up with me.

“Ten days.” Ms. Fuubi's eyes scanned our group. “I'll give you a ten-day grace period. During that time, show me proof that you can take Seed down. That's the best deal I can give you.”

“And if we can't?”

“Then I kill that girl.” She looked down at Saikawa with cold eyes.

“Kimizuka, I'm scared.” Next to me, Saikawa squeezed the cuff of my sleeve. She was brave, but this open hostility from the Assassin seemed to have her intimidated.

“It'll be fine. We'll protect you.”

“It must be because she's jealous of my youth and how precious I am, don't you think?”

“Saikawa, I'm begging you, don't say stuff that's going to make it impossible to keep you safe.”

“And you, Ms. Kase. I hear you're pushing thirty, but if you stick to a good daily skin care routine and reduce the stressors in your life, you'll be able to hang onto your youth for quite a while longer! It's all right, please don't give up!”

“Saikawaaaaa!!!”

I take it back.

The veins in Ms. Fuubi's temples seemed about to burst, and I clapped a hand over Saikawa's mouth.

“Still, how are we going to defeat Seed with only four people?” Shifting us back to a more serious discussion, Charlie put a finger to her chin.

We still knew almost nothing about the leader of SPES. He was a plant-like being who'd flown here from outer space, and he could create clones that had

special abilities. That was all the info we had on him. —However.

“Our best move is asking someone who knows a lot about him,” I said, then suggested someone who was absent. “Siesta.”

Charlie’s eyes widened in surprise. Meanwhile, Ms. Fuubi’s narrowed, as if she was trying to read my intentions.

“She was the type who always came up with ways to resolve incidents before they happened. She must have been laying her own plans to defeat Seed.”

Like the ace detective’s legacy, for example—the thing Charlie had been looking for on that cruise ship, ten days back. In the end, the “legacy” had been us, but the point was that Siesta had left us what we’d need in order to defeat SPES. Besides, she’d been a very careful person; I couldn’t see her expecting us to take down Seed and SPES without so much as a hint.

“Then you think Ma’am left some other legacy somewhere? We don’t have any intel about that...” Charlie sounded dubious.

In that case, I was the one who’d spent three whole years with her. Was there a hint that only I would pick up on? For example, we’d gone to Singapore and Hawaii together, hunting for legendary secret treasures.

Or, more recently, there was another country I knew very well: England. That was where we’d encountered Hel, a top-level SPES executive, and where we’d lived right up until we set off for our final showdown. Was there some sort of hint there, in the place where I’d made my most vivid memories with Siesta...?

“—Oh, is that what this meant?”

I remembered the *object* in the left breast pocket of my jacket.

“This one time, when Siesta and I were living in London, I saw her hastily hide something in a desk drawer.”

That drawer had a lock, and it was solid enough that my lock-picking skills couldn’t get it open. However, as I was trying this and that to find out what was in that drawer, Siesta had told me something.

“—*You’ll have to steal this key from me someday.*” With a belligerent smile, she’d held her master key—one of her Seven Tools—between her fingertips,

wagging it at me.

“Then yesterday, SIESTA gave me this.”

I took a small key out of my pocket, showing it to Ms. Fuubi and the others.

It was what SIESTA had handed to me after yesterday’s battle, before the helicopter took her away for treatment. Natsunagi had inherited the musket from her, and I’d received one of the detective’s Seven Tools from SIESTA as well.

Now that I’d gotten through my task, Siesta wanted me to take down SPES. If she’d chosen to give me this key now, maybe it meant there was some sort of hidden legacy that would help us defeat SPES and Seed.

“You mean your place in London is still just sitting there?” Ms. Fuubi seemed perplexed.

“Well, yeah. They withdraw the rent every month. It’s killing my bank account.”

“? Then why not move out?”

“...Uh, well...”

“Ms. Kase, please don’t ask him any more questions!” Saikawa stuck her oar in. “Kimizuka doesn’t want to lose the love nest he had with Siesta!”

“Shut up! Saikawa, you’re cracking too many jokes!”

“I’m not actually joking,” Saikawa muttered, but I ignored her.

“So, I’m thinking of heading over to London tomorrow.”

I’d decided to retrace Siesta’s footsteps, hoping to find a hint that would help us defeat—or at least learn about—Seed.

“I’ll go, too, then,” said Natsunagi, across the table from me. “After all, taking care of her assistant is part of a detective’s job.” She sounded tired at the thought, but she still winked at me.

“...Yeah, that would be a big help.”

With a little smile back, I took her up on her offer.

“In that case, you two do that. As for you, Charlotte and Yui Saikawa—you’re going to pick up ways to fight Seed.” Ms. Fuubi looked at Charlie, then at Saikawa.

Skills that would let them go head-to-head with Seed... Come to think of it, during the past few days, Natsunagi had gotten Hel’s power, and I’d ended up with Chameleon’s. Ms. Fuubi was trying to give Charlie and Saikawa something similar, since they’d need those powers if they were going to fight.

“First, Charlotte, there’s *a job I’d like you to do.*” She gave us a meaningful smile.

“Br-bring it on?” For some reason, Charlie phrased it like a question. She looked at me, and her eyes were a little teary.

...I get what you’re thinking, but my hands are tied. Sorry.

“So the problem is Yui Saikawa...” Ms. Fuubi’s eyes went to the other girl, and just then—

“Leave her to me.”

The next moment, the big window behind us shattered.

A figure stepped out of the night, into the room.

“Bat?”

A blond man in a suit was standing there, grinning at us.

◆ All ready for joint combat

“How dare you show your face here.”

On her feet, Ms. Fuubi drew her handgun and pointed it at Bat.

“Ha-ha! Police work sure could stand to be a little more imaginative,” the intruder retorted lazily, then plopped down onto the sofa. Just the other day, with Scarlet’s help, he’d slipped through Ms. Fuubi’s security and broken out of jail.

“Did you forget why I had you paroled?” Ms. Fuubi gave Bat a sharp glare. Come to think of it, they had made a deal like that way back during the

Sapphire Eye incident. “I was going to have you keep an eye on Yui Saikawa, but you double-crossed me.”

Oh, so that was what she’d been after... But while Ms. Fuubi had tried to kill Saikawa for being Seed’s candidate vessel, Bat had gone behind her back and tried to make the girl his ally instead. That was what I’d seen play out on the roof of the TV station.

“Hey, that’s why I’m here right now, offering to join your team.” Bat didn’t even glance at the gun trained on him. “I’ll take care of the sapphire girl.” As he made his proposal, his eyes were on Saikawa.

“Me?” Saikawa stared blankly.

“Bat, didn’t you give up on that?” I was pretty sure these negotiations had broken down the other day.

“Ha-ha! My goal and yours were the same all along. And now you’re working with that scary cop, too, right? In that case, I think you could lemme in.”

He must have been listening in on our strategy meeting from a distance with *those special ears*. Bat had his own bone to pick with Seed, and he wanted to join the SPES subjugation team.

“What can you do?” Ms. Fuubi asked, temporarily stowing her gun.

“*Activate that left eye.*” Bat narrowed his own cloudy eyes. “Like the sapphire girl, I’m a human with a seed. I can help her use that eye better.”

Bat had been an ordinary human until he’d affixed one of Seed’s seeds to himself. From what we’d heard, Saikawa had had a seed surgically implanted along with her left eye, so their circumstances were similar.

“What do you say, sapphire girl? Even if revenge isn’t your thing, will you fight for your friends?” Bat asked, shifting the focus. That night, although she’d learned that SPES had taken the lives of her parents, Saikawa had chosen not to avenge them. Still, Bat knew her companions meant more than anything to her now.

“Yes, I will! All right, Bat, help me out!” Saikawa said, agreeing readily.

“You’re really okay with that?” I was prepared for her to laugh at me for being

overprotective, but I asked anyway.

“Of course. I won’t just sit here and let others protect me. I want to be strong enough to protect you as well.” Saikawa smiled, flashing a peace sign at us.

“—Yui, thank you.” Charlie stood up and hugged Saikawa from behind.

Earlier, she’d tried to kill the other girl on orders from Fuubi Kase, the Assassin. By now, though, the two of them looked like they’d made up.

“Charlie...”

“Yui...”

“Would you rub my feet?”

“—Oh, yes.”

Correction: Apparently it would take a lot more than that before Charlie could look Saikawa in the face.

“Still, I guess we’ve got something like a plan for now.” Leaning back in my chair, I gave a long sigh.

“Right,” Natsunagi agreed. “You and I will go to London and look for the hint Siesta left about defeating Seed. Yui and Charlie will build up the strength to fight him.”

“—Just for the record, Watson. Are you sure that’s what you should be doing?”

I’d pretty much made up my mind, but not everyone agreed. Bat really seemed to be enjoying his cigarette as he went on. “I mean, look. I’m pretty sure I heard some protagonist screaming yesterday about how he was gonna bring the woman he loved back to life. I just figured that’s what you’d be trying to do next.”

“Ghk— Don’t you start messing with me, too!”

I bolted to my feet, thumping the table in protest... But he didn’t seem the least bit concerned. He just made himself comfortable on the sofa. Dammit, had those ears of his really picked up everything I said yesterday?

“Ha-ha! Don’t get me wrong. I’m asking if you’re sure you’ve got time to mess

around with Seed. What you want most is to resurrect the Ace Detective, right?” Bat gave a crooked smile.

...He had a point.

Honestly, in extreme terms, I didn’t care about Seed or SPES.

But Siesta’s final wish had been a request to defeat SPES. She’d said we were her last hope, and I couldn’t ignore that. Besides—

“There’s not much point bringing Siesta back to life if she comes back to a ruined world.”

And so I’d fight SPES. I’d take Seed down.

That was all this was.

“Plus, resurrecting Siesta is going to take a miracle. It’s not going to happen in just a day or two.”

Bringing the dead back to life was a completely ridiculous idea. Even so, I did think I could believe in it a little. The reason was Scarlet, the vampire I’d met yesterday. He was a real vampire, one with an ability that defied belief: He could breathe life back into humans who’d died.

There was just one issue.

“I figured you’d go for the vampire’s abilities, but I guess you’re not dumb enough to make a snap decision *after seeing that*.”

Bat and I were probably thinking of the same thing. He grimaced a little.

On the roof of the TV station, we’d seen Chameleon, back from hell. The “undead” the vampire created lost everything, with the exception of what had been their strongest instinct in life. Nobody wanted to resurrect Siesta in a state like that. Even if it took time, we had to find another way.

“...Haaah. Maybe I shouldn’t be telling you this, but...,” Ms. Fuubi interjected. She was scratching her head, looking awkward. “Since you’re planning to go to London, there’s *someone like us* there. If you take this issue to her, it might change something.”

“A Tuner?”

The only Tuners I'd actually met were Siesta the Ace Detective, Scarlet the Vampire, and Fuubi Kase the Assassin. According to what I'd been told earlier, there were twelve of them in all. Who was the Tuner in London?

"The Oracle."

Ms. Fuubi tossed a photograph to me.

"That little girl knows every one of the world's potential futures."

◆ At ten thousand meters again

"Beef or fish?"

We were up in the air, at ten thousand meters. In terms of phrases you were likely to run into near the front of books like *English in Five Minutes a Day*, the question I'd just heard was in second place. (First place goes to "Do you play tennis?") "Fish," I replied, glancing over at my traveling companion. "What about you, Natsunagi?"

She didn't seem to have registered the flight attendant's question. She had her earbuds in, and her eyes were glued to the movie on her seat's private screen.

"Sorry to interrupt when you're busy blushing at one of those sudden love scenes foreign films always seem to have, but don't ignore the cabin attendant."

"Eep!"

As I reached over and pulled out an earbud, Natsunagi flinched. "Wha...? I, I-I-I-I'll double-kill you!"

"That's not on the menu." I modified the order to "Two fish," one for Natsunagi.

"...Kimizuka, why are you such a jerk?" After she'd watched the flight attendant leave, Natsunagi shot me a resentful look.

That's weird. Here I'd been playing the bad guy because I'd assumed she was into that sort of thing.

"Listen up, Natsunagi. You get tired of a saint in three days, but you can watch

a villain your whole life and not get bored.”

“What, was that theory inspired by the ‘one gets tired of a beauty in three days’ saying or something? Even if I don’t get bored, I’ll hate you, all right? I already do hate you, Kimizuka!”

Natsunagi gave me a cold glare.

A little-known fact is that hardest type to get tired of is a beautiful and very difficult girl.

Not that I’m going to say who it is, specifically.

“In other words, the proverb implies the more righteous you are, the more damage you take,” I said.

“That’s one ugly proverb.”



“Oh, and in the movie you’re watching, the leading lady who’s so devoted to that guy ends up shielding him from an enemy bullet and getting shot dead.”

“And you just hit me with the worst spoiler ever!” Natsunagi tugged at her hair. Then she heaved a big sigh and powered down the screen. “...I really do hate you, Kimizuka. There’s nothing fun about being with you.” She turned her face away, blatantly snubbing me.

But.

“You can say that, but we’re gonna be together for at least ten more hours,” I told her. She was gazing out the window.

We were at ten thousand meters, on an international flight to London. *Since we’d gotten pulled into a little trouble* on our way to the airport, we’d ended up missing our flight and taking the next one instead, but we were still making progress on our objective.

“I know that. We’re not going back to Japan until we find Siesta’s legacy and see the Oracle.”

Exactly. The Oracle was one of the Tuners, and the only person who might have a clue about bringing Siesta back to life.

I thought back over the explanation we’d been given yesterday.

“An oracle?”

My eyebrows drew together at Ms. Fuubi’s proposal. She’d mentioned this person while we were thinking of ways to bring Siesta back to life. However, I was pretty sure...

“SIESTA mentioned her, didn’t she?” As the first one to remember, Saikawa spoke up before I could say any more.

Yeah, when SIESTA first told us about the Tuners, “Oracle” had been one of the ones she mentioned, right along with positions like Vampire and Assassin.

“Yeah, that’s right. I’ve never met her in person. I don’t even know her name. They say the Oracle foresees everything with her *precognition*, though.”

At this point, I’d already met pseudohumans and a vampire, so I couldn’t just

say *That's crazy* and kick the idea of clairvoyance to the curb. Besides, I'd heard that the Tuners were people appointed to protect the world during crises. That meant the idea of a real Oracle who could see those crises coming made a lot of sense.

"If there's a future where the Ace Detective comes back to life, the Oracle may be able to show you how to get to it."

"...I see. So we should ask her for help, hmm?"

My eyes went to the picture again. The photo was a slightly blurry sneak shot. It showed a girl with pale blue hair and European features.

If she was able to foresee every future possibility, she might be able to find a route where Siesta came back to life. A way to work a miracle, something besides the vampire's method of resurrection.

"So, if you're going to London to look for the Ace Detective's legacy, consider meeting her, too. The Oracle could be the key to reviving her," Ms. Fuubi said brusquely.

Our trip had acquired a second objective.

"Ooh, a trip all alone with Kimizuka... Doesn't that mean he's already locked into your route, Nagisa?" Saikawa teased.

"Saikawa, don't compare people's lives to a dating sim."

"Yui, no matter how many flags you plant, this guy doesn't have that kind of courage. He just doesn't."

Natsunagi, don't put a hand to your heart and quietly shake your head. And get that seriously photogenic smile off your face.

"Well, whatever. Sorry, Saikawa, but you need to loan me the funds to get to London."

"Huh? As if any girlfriend would loan you money when she knows you're headed off to fool around with another woman."

This idol singer, who was several years younger than me, suddenly scared me. And who is whose girlfriend?

“Serves you right. You proposed to me yesterday, and now you go off with some other girl. You make me sick.”

“Charlie, don’t go saying things that’ll give people the wrong idea! When did I ever propose...to... I did, didn’t I? Come to think of it.”

Looking back, I did remember making a crazy remark like that during our fight with Ms. Fuubi. I hadn’t genuinely meant it, of course, but...

“Wow! What is this? Incredible... My blood is actually boiling with indignation. That’s amazing!”

“Natsunagi, the disconnect between your mood and what you’re saying is freaking me out.”

I really hate this idea. I absolutely don’t want to be alone with Natsunagi when she’s like this.

“...So, how do we meet the Oracle?” I asked Ms. Fuubi, trying to get the conversation back on track.

“Uh, about that.” She looked unusually apologetic. “I’m not sure how to tell you this, after I made the suggestion myself, but...*it’s said that nobody can ever meet the Oracle.*”

Oh, I see.

It looks like the ending I’m working toward won’t just hand me a miracle.

“—This really takes me back.” On the plane, the comment slipped out of me.

“?”

Natsunagi looked perplexed.

“I just meant I was on a plane like this four years ago, too.”

All by myself, with a mysterious attaché case.

However, at ten thousand meters, I—no, we—became a team.

“I see. So this is where you and Siesta began,” Natsunagi said. She was watching the white clouds drift by outside the window.

“Yeah, just one heck of a coincidence... No, actually, I think it was inevitable.”

It had all been part of her plan. That was how I'd been launched into three years of dazzling adventure by the detective in the seat next to mine.

"Oh, Kimizuka. That's the look of a guy who's reminiscing about his former girlfriend."

"What do you mean? Cut it out. And don't hold up a mirror."

Maybe it was because I'd been indulging in memories of that distant day.

The next moment—it wasn't my imagination.

I genuinely heard a flight attendant who was making her way through the cabin say...

"Is there a detective on the plane?"

◆ **There are no extras in this world**

When I heard that, my memories instantly snapped back to that day, four years ago.

That incident, which would turn out to be a hijacking orchestrated by Bat, was the very thing that had launched my journey through the extraordinary.

"My knack for getting pulled into trouble is in fantastic form today."

Who'd have believed I'd hear the same sentence I'd heard that day, under the same conditions? I couldn't do anything as the past played out again in front of me; I had no idea how to handle this.

"Is there a detective on the plane?" I heard the flight attendant again, right next to me.

Man, I guess I can't just ignore this, I thought. I looked up— "...Wait. Aren't you...?"

"It's been a long time, sir. Thank you for your help before."

Was a string of this many coincidences even possible?

The woman who'd nodded to me was the very same flight attendant who'd come to tell Siesta and me about the hijacking, four years ago.

"We made it through that incident safely, and it was all thanks to you, the

detective, and her assistant.” The woman smiled; she seemed to be in her late twenties. “As a matter of fact, I was on my first flight that day. I’m afraid I made a terrible spectacle of myself...” She sounded apologetic.

“Oh, uh, don’t worry about it.”

Come to think of it, she had panicked when Bat showed up. Well, new hire or veteran, it would have been weirder for any human to see a thing like that and not freak out.

“But I should introduce myself. My name is Olivia. It’s a pleasure to see you again, Mr. Kimizuka,” Olivia said formally.

“Are you friends, Kimizuka? ...You’re friends with a cabin attendant?”

Natsunagi, who’d never met the woman before, seemed perplexed. On top of that, the dubious look she directed at me seemed to imply something else.

“Not ‘friends,’ exactly. I just got *dragged into her problem* once, way back when. It’s not the sort of relationship to get suspicious about.”

And I have no idea why I need to justify myself at all.

“Now that you mention it, Mr. Kimizuka, you’re with a different detective this time.”

“Don’t you drag the conversation in random directions, too!”

“Are you headed to London for your honeymoon?”

“Do flight attendants always mess with people like this...?”

And why does Natsunagi look as if she wasn’t actually annoyed by that comment? Don’t give me that “Eh-heh-heh!” business.

“We’re headed to London to pick up a little something I forgot. There’s also a person we need to meet, no matter what... Although I don’t even know her name,” I added, forcing a smile.

“On your way to meet someone whose name you don’t know... You’re on yet another difficult mission, I see.” Olivia smiled gently.

“And? What’s going on?” I asked, thinking it was about time we got down to business.

According to Olivia, there was an incident in progress up here at ten thousand meters. And what they needed was a detective, not a doctor or the police. Had pseudohumans turned up? Or a vampire? Or was it an alien invasion?

Aw man, there were so many more options now than there had been four years ago. I was waiting for her answer when...

“Paging Miss Mia Whitlock from seat A20. When you hear this announcement, please speak to the nearest cabin attendant.”

The announcement was being made repeatedly, in both Japanese and English. It was the sort of thing you heard all the time in airports...but I'd never expected to hear it on a plane. Why bother with an announcement? Why not just go directly to that passenger's seat?

Or...don't tell me.

“Has she disappeared?”

Olivia nodded. She was wearing a sardonic smile. “Yes. A passenger who was here when we took off has simply evaporated.”

That was the reason behind the bizarre onboard announcement: Mia Whitlock had vanished from a plane that was cruising at ten thousand meters.

“Naturally, we always check the passenger list and make sure everyone is on board before we prepare for takeoff. However, when we were distributing the in-flight meals, it became apparent that one passenger was missing.” Olivia put a hand to her forehead, as if she had no idea what to do with the situation.

“Was Mia Whitlock traveling alone?” Natsunagi asked, leaning over my seat to speak to Olivia.

“Don't put your hand on my thigh, don't put your head close to me, your hair is gonna get in my mouth...” Forced to inhale the sweet fragrance of Natsunagi's perfume, I held still and listened to their exchange.

“Yes, she seems to have been by herself. About an hour after takeoff, a crew member saw someone who matched her description walking away from her seat.”

I see... Was she headed for the bathroom or something?

Then, instead of returning to her seat, she'd vanished.

"Have you searched the plane?" I asked, pushing Natsunagi back into her seat.

"Of course, we've looked everywhere we could. However, we haven't been able to locate her."

"And that's why you're asking for a detective?" Yeesh. It might not be as flashy as having a pseudohuman turn up, but this still might get hairier than I'd thought. As I was sighing about that...

"Yes. I saw your names on the passenger list, so..." Olivia's rouged lips parted in a grin.

"Hey. You had your sights set on us from the beginning."

I slumped in my seat. Olivia had asked for a detective, but she'd been counting on us all along.

...Hmm? No, wait. Something about that thought tugged at me.

"Hey, what happens if you don't find the missing passenger?" Before I could get my question answered, Natsunagi asked Olivia one of her own.

Her response was, "Well, we'll have to return to Japan."

"Please don't smile when you say that. Just don't."

Apparently, the first problem we'd have to tackle wasn't finding Siesta's legacy or meeting the Oracle. It was solving a locked-room mystery at ten thousand meters.

◆ A mystery cliché

"I smell a case," Natsunagi said, looking sharper than she really needed to.

"We're pretty likely to smell something, anyway." I grimaced.

Natsunagi ignored me. She was taking a careful look around the cramped room.

You guessed it; we were in an onboard bathroom... Not, of course, for any weird reasons. We were doing a field investigation.

“Hmm. Still, I don’t see anything strange... Do you?” Natsunagi reached up, touching the ceiling, but it didn’t seem to have any removable sections.

Of course, there was no guarantee that Mia Whitlock had vanished from this bathroom. There just weren’t many places on the plane that an ordinary passenger had access to, which made this one a strong candidate.

“Maybe she got dragged into the toilet.” I knew it wasn’t the right answer, but I was just saying whatever came to mind.

Four years ago, an incident had occurred at my middle school. They said that if you knocked three times on the third stall from the door at three in the morning, Miss Hanako would drag you into the toilet. However, Siesta had solved that incident brilliantly.

“Okay, Kimizuka, bend over a second.” Natsunagi pointed at the toilet, trying to turn me into one of Miss Hanako’s victims.

“Natsunagi, don’t just use your assistant as a human sacrifice. I don’t have the guts to do my business in front of other people anyway.” Unlike the former white-haired detective. “Actually, Natsunagi, that sort of bathroom play is your thing, isn’t it? I figured you were kinda into that stuff.”

“Don’t be so casual about my fetishes! —I mean, it’s not a fetish, but still!”

“Oh, I see.”

“Don’t just give up on teasing me out of nowhere! I mean, it’s fine to stop, but even so!”

Natsunagi was flailing around wildly now. Ignoring her, I checked the room over thoroughly, but didn’t see anything that looked suspicious. This place seemed to be a dead end.

We left the bathroom and walked around the cabin, looking for some other hint. It wasn’t that big, though, and we couldn’t think of too many places where an amateur could hide. Planes built for long-distance flights had spaces for the crew to rest, but we didn’t see any sign that she’d crept in there.

“Where else might she be able to hide...? The luggage compartments?”

I walked along, looking up at the luggage rack above the seats. Four years ago,

I'd hidden the musket Siesta had made me smuggle up there.

"Actually, why did Mia Whitlock have to hide in the first place?" Natsunagi asked out of nowhere. "We've been treating this as a voluntary disappearance, but couldn't somebody have taken her against her will? For example—"

"She's being held prisoner?"

Natsunagi nodded.

The culprit might be holding Mia Whitlock captive somewhere. We decided to keep that possibility in mind, too. Before we knew it, we'd reached the cockpit at the front of the plane.

"This was where it happened last time."

On the other side of that heavy door, I'd met Bat, and my days of fighting SPES had begun.

"Could SPES be involved this time, too?"

"With this many *coincidences* in play already, we can't exactly rule it out."

I'd borrowed that line; it was actually something Natsunagi had said once. She'd told me not to be irresponsible and fatalistic calling things "coincidence." We had to think about what it meant that this had happened.

There had to be more to this incident, something behind it all. Foreshadowing. As I mulled over what it could be, Natsunagi and I returned to our seats.

"It does feel like the pieces are starting to come together, but..." I folded my arms, mentally organizing the information and clues we'd found so far.

Siesta's legacy. Our search for the Oracle. My journey with the detective. A flight attendant I'd run into again for the first time in four years. The missing passenger. A locked-room mystery at ten thousand meters. Confinement. SPES. Coincidence and inevitability. As far as other potential hints went, there was *that one remark she'd made...*

"I don't get it. I don't get what I don't get," I grumbled to myself, glancing at my in-flight meal. Our food had arrived while we were away from our seats.

When I thought it over carefully, it had been a long time since I'd run into such a tough, classic puzzle. Of course, when the likes of SPES were involved, nothing could be a mere game.

Either way, my brain had lost its edge, and I didn't feel anywhere near the right answer. Massaging my temples lightly, I glanced to the side, and— "... You're sure enjoying that."

Natsunagi was scarfing down the in-flight meal like a high school rugby player. She was enjoying this trip with everything she had.

"Kimizuka, you gonna eat yours?" Having polished off one meal, she started eyeing mine.

What, is there a rule that the Ace Detective has to be a big eater?

"If you say you just can't handle another bite, I suppose I could make an exception and eat that for you."

"Look, there's nothing cute about playing hard to get that way." *You're just a high school girl who's highlighting her gluttony factor.*

"Th-then you mean the other times I play hard to get *are* cute?"

"If you're aware you're just playing hard to get, does that mean you're admitting to getting all mushy about me sometimes, too?"

"I—I didn't go that far! I didn't say the earlier stuff, either!" Natsunagi was desperately trying to cover up her blunder. *Great, now the playing field's even.*

"Huh? What's with the mini muscle pose?" I asked.

"I'm usually the one who gets made fun of. You're the only person I ever get to be superior to."

"What, I'm at the very bottom?!"

"Well, it's more like you, me, and Charlie are having a long, messy contest for it."

"Oh, and then Yui's above us... What's the deal with this power balance?"

"The problem may be that we're all less mentally mature than a middle-school girl." However, that was a really tough problem, so I stopped thinking

about it. “More importantly, what we really should be thinking about right now is the missing passenger.”

We’d found a certain number of hints, but the truth was still nowhere in sight.

“Knox’s Ten Commandments,” Natsunagi muttered, looking serious. She’d just finished wolfing down my in-flight meal.

“Hey, don’t eat that. It’s mine.” I didn’t know how she could keep such a straight face, but it wasn’t like she’d tell me anyway.

“Knox’s Ten Commandments were proposed by a British mystery author named Ronald Knox in 1928. They’re a list of ten rules that must be followed when writing mysteries.”

“Oh yeah, I know those. The gist was that the solutions to mystery puzzles need to be fair to readers... What about them, though?”

Granted, Knox himself went on to publish a book that broke those ten commandments; they’re only one standard. Still, why would she bring them up now?

“Well, if we frame our current mystery in those terms, it might help us see something new.”

“...I dunno. It might work in a regular mystery novel, but I’m not sure those rules apply to the stuff we tend to get dragged into.”

For example, two of Knox’s rules are “All supernatural or preternatural agencies are ruled out” and “You must not include an enigmatic figure with extraordinary physical abilities.” We’re currently fighting pseudohumans, so unfortunately, those rules don’t cover us.

“But it’s not a sure thing that SPES is involved this time, is it?”

“Well... No, it’s not. So you’re saying we should think of rules we could use just this one time?”

Of the ten, the one that seemed most likely to help us out with this locked room puzzle was—

“ “Not more than one secret room or passage is allowable.” ”

We accidentally said it in unison, then exchanged looks.

“Okay, then if we flip that rule around...”

“Yeah. Even in an airplane, there could be *just one place* where someone could hide.”

And that *secret room* had to be somewhere Natsunagi and I couldn’t access easily.

Of course, our hypothesis was based on the premise that this was a puzzle in a mystery novel. But if that premise was a clue that would solve this case—

“Kimizuka, I’ve got it,” Natsunagi said. “Listen.” She pointed at me.

“When you have eliminated all which is impossible, then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth!”

Delivering a line worthy of the great detective Holmes, she gave me a triumphant look.

“By the way, Natsunagi, was that detective novel good? The one in the bag by your feet that you tagged all over with page markers.”

“...I hate you, Kimizuka.”

◆ That future was determined in the distant past

“This is herbal tea. Be careful; it’s hot.”

With practiced movements, Olivia offered us cups. The seats Natsunagi and I were sitting in were as soft and fluffy as sofas.

“So this is first class...” I was used to traveling economy, and just from the cushiness of these seats, the difference between that and this was blindingly obvious.

“Those seats were unoccupied to begin with, so do make yourselves comfortable.” Smiling, Olivia stood in the aisle between us. There really didn’t seem to be any passengers besides Natsunagi and me in first class.

“Are you sure it’s okay for us to use them, though?” Looking apologetic, Natsunagi poured an expensive-looking drink into a chilled glass on the side

table, then gulped it down. So much for her reservations about upgrading to first class. *At least drink the herbal tea she just gave you.*

“Yes, I asked permission. Besides, this may not be the sort of thing we can talk about in front of the passengers.” Olivia gave us a wry smile. “Well? Is it true that you know where Miss Whitlock is?” Her eyes narrowed.

After Natsunagi and I had realized the truth of the matter, we’d summoned Olivia, and she’d designated these seats as the venue for our talk.

“Of course. That’s what we came here to tell you... But can you take over from here, Natsunagi?”

“Mm-hmm, absolutely.” Natsunagi drained a second glassful of her drink, and then:

“It was you who *hid* Mia Whitlock, wasn’t it—Ms. Olivia?”

That was one heck of an opener.

“I see.” Olivia gave a little nod. “I’d really like to argue against that assertion, but let’s hear your theory first. I imagine that’s the standard procedure.” She prompted Natsunagi to go on, looking perfectly composed. “What made you imagine that I had *imprisoned* Miss Whitlock?”

“Because that was the only remaining possibility,” Natsunagi said. It was something she’d already told me. “No matter where on the plane Kimizuka and I looked, we couldn’t find her. In that case, it’s logical to assume she was hidden in a location where *amateurs* like us would never find her, isn’t it?”

“...Ah. So you think a *professional* had a hand in this.”

“Right. I’m confident that Mia Whitlock is being kept somewhere that isn’t accessible to us. Like the cockpit, for example... Or maybe an in-flight meal cart.” Natsunagi’s eyes darted to the silver service wagon beside Olivia.

The cart was generally used to serve drinks and meals, but *one slim woman* could probably fit inside it. Of course, there was no guarantee that that was where she was, but Olivia was a member of the cabin crew. With her cooperation, that “single exit” from the locked room definitely existed on this plane.

“Right now, Mia Whitlock is in your custody, Olivia. Isn’t that right?” Natsunagi confronted the guilty party with the evidence of her crime.

As a matter of fact, this fit another of Knox’s Ten Commandments: “The culprit must be mentioned in the early part of the story.” And all this began when Olivia asked whether there was a detective on the plane.

“...Hmm. That’s an interesting theory.” Olivia slowly closed her eyes, nodding quietly. “But what motive could I have for attempting such a thing? Why would I take Miss Mia Whitlock captive? She’s one of our passengers.”

She had a point. When solving mysteries, a deduction wasn’t enough. As she said, we couldn’t establish our theory if we couldn’t present a criminal motive.

“Why did you imprison Mia Whitlock, an important passenger? That’s simple.” I supplemented Natsunagi’s deduction, as an assistant should.

“Um, it’s fine if I say that bit, too.”

“Natsunagi, let me show my stuff once in a while.”

Now that I’d (decided that I’d) gotten Natsunagi’s permission, I filled Olivia in.

“Because Mia Whitlock is the Oracle, one of the twelve Tuners who protect the world.”

Olivia’s eyes narrowed. “‘Oracle’? What are you talking about?”

“It’s too late to play dumb. We know you’re *on this team*.”

I thought back to my first conversation with Olivia today. She’d teased me about traveling with a different detective this time...and she’d also said she’d decided to count on us after seeing Natsunagi’s name on the passenger list. Olivia knowing me wasn’t strange, but it *was* weird for her to know Natsunagi. Not only that, but she’d immediately assumed that Natsunagi was a detective. In other words, *Olivia knew too much about us*.

“But what makes you certain that Miss Mia Whitlock is this ‘Oracle’?”

“The fact that you set up this pain-in-the-butt riddle for us in the first place.”

Olivia knew about us, and yet she’d pretended not to and brought us this problem. She clearly had a reason for this, and her goal was probably to keep us

from meeting the Oracle and achieving ours.

I remembered the remark Ms. Fuubi had made before we left Japan, about how nobody ever got to meet the Oracle. With that in mind, it wasn't too much of a leap to link the vanished passenger with the Tuner.

"You have some sort of mission, and you couldn't let us meet Mia Whitlock. Meaning you hid her somewhere on this plane."

It had to be a *coincidence* my knack for getting dragged into trouble had created for us. Since Natsunagi and I had missed our plane, we'd ended up on the same flight as the Oracle. However, the Oracle never met anyone else. There was a possibility that we'd recognize her, so she'd avoided us and hidden somewhere on this plane—with the help of Olivia, a cabin attendant.

"I see, yes, that does sound plausible. However..." Olivia wasn't done fighting our deduction. "You must have realized that your theory includes one major inconsistency."

...*Oh, she'd caught that, huh?* And that particular inconsistency could wreck the basic premise of our deduction. "If you don't want us to meet the Oracle, why did you ask us to solve this mystery? That's what you mean, right?"

"Yes, exactly. If, as the detective claims, I am the one who caused this incident...I don't believe it would be logical for me to ask you to solve it."

Of course, as cabin attendant, it hadn't been that strange for Olivia to explain the problem to us. However, if she was the *culprit*, we had a contradiction on our hands. It set up a bizarre situation, in which the criminal had actively asked the detective to solve the case.

—That said, the detective already had a theory that resolved that contradiction, and I let her be the one to tell it.

"Because of your mission, you were doing your best to keep us from meeting the Oracle," said Natsunagi, as if Olivia's true intentions were an open book to her.

"Somewhere in your heart, you wanted to bring us into contact with the Oracle. Either that, or you posed this riddle to test us, *hoping that we would be worthy of meeting her.*"

That was why she had asked the detective to solve this case. It was like Bat's hijacking: More than anyone else, the culprit herself had hoped the incident would be resolved.

"...Brilliant work." Finally, with a faint smile, Olivia acknowledged our theory. "Correct. It was I who spirited away Miss Mia Whitlock. You accurately deduced both my objective in causing this incident and the reason I asked you to solve it."

"...Then who are you?" Natsunagi asked Olivia the one question our earlier detective work hadn't been able to answer. "We understand that you didn't want to let us meet the Oracle. But why are you helping her?"

It was clear that Olivia had been the one behind this...but she was a flight attendant. Why had she done it?

In response, the woman said, "I belong to a family that has served the Oracle for generations. In a way, I am her servant." She confessed her identity gracefully. "The Oracle does not actively meet anyone, even other Tuners. Thus, when someone requests an audience with her, I *screen* them beforehand."

...Thought so. Olivia had asked us to solve a puzzle she'd set up herself in order to judge whether Natsunagi and I were worthy of an audience with her mistress.

The one who'd written the scenario for this mystery was Olivia herself, and she'd cast the two of us as readers who were supposed to solve it. That was why, just this once, applying Knox's Ten Commandments had worked. If she was this levelheaded and rational, then her panic over seeing Bat had probably been an act.

"So this was a test to see whether we could meet the Oracle."

"Yes. Or maybe I simply hoped it would be." Borrowing the word Natsunagi had used, Olivia quietly closed her eyes.

She must have meant she'd hoped we'd be worthy of meeting the Oracle. Her mistress was supposedly impossible to meet, and yet she'd wanted us to beat the odds.

"Is there a future you'd like to change?" Natsunagi asked her.

It sounded as if she'd realized something.

She was asking if Olivia was attempting to betray her mistress, a girl who was said to know every possible future. Just like a certain white-haired maid who was willing to betray her mistress, as long as it was for that mistress's sake.

"—Well, I'm afraid we've chatted a little too long. I need to return to my duties." Slowly opening her eyes again, Olivia turned to leave without answering Natsunagi's question. "Please keep those seats. We're still a long way from our destination."

"Hold it. That's a very kind offer, but more importantly—does this mean we don't get to meet the Oracle after all?" I'd just assumed we'd meet her now, since we'd passed the test.

Olivia chuckled. "Personally, I would like you to, but...whether you'll meet the Oracle or not, only God knows."

Putting her face very close to mine, Olivia smiled a bewitching and very grown-up smile.

◆ **Announcing the end of the romcom**

Ten-odd hours later, our plane had landed without further trouble, and we'd arrived at the London hotel where we'd be staying that night. We checked in, then took our luggage to our room.

"And? Why are we at a hotel?" Far from celebrating our safe arrival, Natsunagi gave me a dissatisfied look. "Weren't we going to your love nest with Siesta, Kimizuka?"

Like I keep telling people, it wasn't a love nest. Still, as Natsunagi said, we had originally planned to head for that apartment when we got to London. We would have saved on hotel costs that way. Problem was...

"There wouldn't be much point without the key." I pulled out the linings of my empty pockets.

"Haaah. Things like that don't normally get stolen, do they?"

"I'm not normal; that's probably why it happened."

This is the curse I was born with. My knack for getting dragged into stuff.

When we'd first left the airport, we'd set off for Siesta's apartment. Partway there, though, I'd realized my wallet was missing. That all-important master key had been in it. After tripping at the starting line, we'd decided to temporarily base ourselves out of this hotel.

"Still, whoever got it was pretty good. I've been running into pickpockets for ages, so it takes more than average skills to steal anything off me."

"You sure are used to some unpleasant stuff... Well, what are we going to do now?"

"We did file a police report, but I doubt they'll find it anytime soon."

"Then what do we do? Break down the door with a drill?"

"Don't just try to destroy our love nest!"

"Geez, even you're saying it now."

C'mon, I was kidding.

"We've got one other goal besides searching for Siesta's legacy: meeting the Oracle. Why don't we work on that one for now?"

Of course, if it looked as though we wouldn't find the master key, as Natsunagi said, we'd probably have to force our way into the house and break the lock on that drawer. My one worry was that Siesta might have rigged a bomb to go off if we didn't unlock everything properly...

"The Oracle, huh? She thinks she's got us thoroughly licked, doesn't she?" Natsunagi grumbled. Then, with a frustrated "Argh!" she dived onto the bed.

"You're telling me where you'd want to be licked by the person you like?"

"It wasn't a fetish thing!"

It wasn't, huh?

On the bed, Natsunagi lay on her stomach and kicked her legs petulantly, venting her bad mood. I kept catching glimpses of her panties, but pointing this out would cause more trouble than it was worth, so I just kept quiet and ogled.

"...Maybe on the neck."

“Look, I have no idea how to react if you actually answer that question.”

Not only had the attack been extremely vivid, but delayed. She got me good.

“—You’re the one who asked, Kimizuka.”

Natsunagi got up, sitting on the bed with her legs splayed out in a V, and pouted at me. “That wasn’t it. What I was trying to say is that the Oracle mocked us, and I’m not okay with it.”

Yeah. First we’d had to play along with that riddle, and then we hadn’t been allowed to meet her anyway. Apparently Natsunagi hadn’t liked that at all... But.

“Well, Ms. Fuubi’s a fellow Tuner, and even she hasn’t met her. It would have been weird if we’d connected with her that easily.”

Actually, you could say that connecting with her at all had been a good start.

...Although that hadn’t been a coincidence so much as the work of her servant Olivia. “For now, we’ll just have to take it one step at a time. We’ll get to the Oracle on our own next time, and we’ll have her find a future where Siesta comes back to life.”

There was no telling whether that future existed, of course. My wish was too much to hope for, but I still said it firmly. Just as I’d sworn on that rising sun.

“So help me out, Ace Detective. Keep helping me get Siesta back.”

“...I guess I’ll have to.” Natsunagi seemed to have settled down a bit. She gave a faint smile.

“If you’ll settle for a proxy detective, I’ll take the job.”

She seemed to be echoing the promise I’d made to her in that classroom after school. Back then, I’d said I’d help her find her heart’s former owner as an assistant, not a detective. Right now, I was sure what Natsunagi wanted most wasn’t to become the Ace Detective, but to reclaim Siesta.

“For now, want to come up with a way to see the Oracle?”

“Sounds like a plan. Oh, but first, I want to take a shower... Step outside for a bit.” Natsunagi tried to shoo me out of the room.

“Except this is my room, too.”

“Y-your room? Huh? Why?! You didn’t get us separate rooms?!”

“All the other hotels were booked up. Even here, this was the only available room. Tough it out, all right?”

“—If it’s not at least a room with twin beds, I can’t!”

“It’s fine; that sort of thing doesn’t really bother me.”

“It! Bothers! *Me!*”

For some reason—most likely anger—Natsunagi’s face turned bright red, and she somehow started bouncing on the little double bed, even though her legs were still splayed out to the sides.

“We were living under the same roof until just the other day.”

“That was completely different! And it’s just the two of us now!”

“Don’t worry, I won’t get up to anything like what you’re thinking.”

“! Wh-why are you so completely determined not to let anything like that happen with me?!”

“Would you decide whether you want something to happen or not?”

“I’m annoyed that you don’t even see me as a girl!”

Apparently the hearts of eighteen-year-old girls were complicated. Natsunagi flopped over onto the comforter, where I was going to be sleeping later. I wished she wouldn’t muss the covers up like that.

“...What is this? Do you really and truly hate me or something, Kimizuka?”

“Why are you asking questions that are going to get me decapitated if I answer them the tiniest bit wrong?”

Had Natsunagi’s self-esteem always been this low? With a bemused smile, I opened the closet door so I could hang up my jacket. Then I spotted the book.

“Oh... Is this why I can’t do it?” Natsunagi was murmuring. “I always get emotional right away. Siesta didn’t. The difference in affection means...”

She seemed to be conducting some sort of mournful review session. I think that’s healthy.

This was probably my chance to restore her morale, though.

I was sure whatever future awaited us, we wouldn't see it coming.

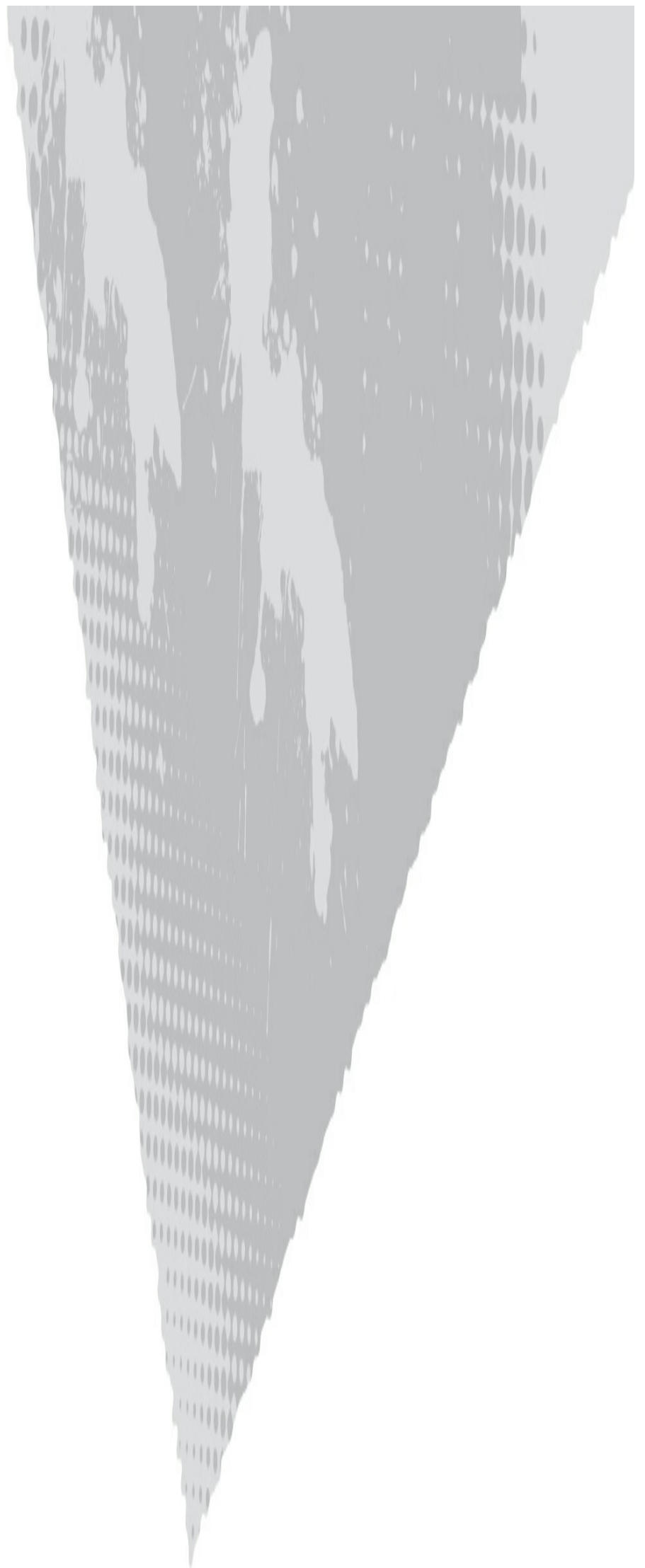
"Natsunagi, recognize this?" Taking the book out of the closet, I held it out to her.

"Huh? That's..." Natsunagi's eyes went wide.

She'd shared some memories with Hel, and she knew what this was, too.

We'd fought over it in London last year.

"Yeah, there's no mistake. It's the sacred text."



Side Charlotte

“...! Haah. Four left now...”

I leaned back against the alley wall, then slid down to sit against it, trying to get my breathing under control. A young guy with long hair lay on the ground beside me. A surviving SPES member. If I'd given him even a tiny opening, I would have been the one lying there now.

“So you finally cleared them away, huh?”

I heard clicking footsteps, and a woman's surprisingly husky voice came closer.

“You could stand to fight more efficiently, though.” As she smoked her cigarette, she started criticizing the fight I'd just had.

“Then teach me how, Fuubi.” Down on the concrete, hugging my knees, I glared up at my extremely arrogant redheaded boss.

Ever since Kimizuka and Nagisa left for London, I'd been putting in *live combat training* under her direction, but all she did was nitpick. She apparently wasn't planning to give me any proper instruction.

“Wait, didn't you quit smoking?”

“Quit? Oh yeah, sure did.” Even as Fuubi said it, she was puffing away as brazenly as an old Japanese movie star... *That's insanely annoying.*

“At least help me out. Are you planning to just watch your subordinate get killed?” I demanded, getting to my feet and confiscating all her cigarettes.

The SPES members we were fighting right now were like Bat: humans with implanted seeds. Of course, they weren't as strong as a *purebred* like Chameleon, and Bat probably outclassed them. Even so, they weren't the kind of enemies I could get careless with.

Fuubi gave me a sharp look. “What are you talking about, Charlotte? This has been your job *for the past year.*”

...She was right. Taking down SPES survivors had been my mission for a year, ever since Ma'am died. It was the "role division" she'd talked about.

My combat skills were good, so I was in charge of the fighting. Kimizuka was clever, so he used knowledge and on-the-spot decisions to solve problems. Ma'am had always wanted us to work together that way.

"And yet that guy..."

Kimizuka had spent the entire year since we'd lost Ma'am in his tepid routine. Just remembering it was making me mad again... But I shook my head. This wasn't the time.

"Is there any point in hunting these survivors, though? Wouldn't it be better to find a way to defeat Seed directly?"

Of course, Nagisa and Kimizuka were probably looking for that very thing right now.

"We're snuffing out his other candidate vessels." Fuubi leaned back against the wall, folding her arms. "Yui Saikawa's definitely at the top of his list, but we can't guarantee he won't burn through other seed-implanted humans as temporary vessels. It's better to wipe them out now."

I looked at the SPES member I'd just been fighting. So there was a risk that the guy on the ground would be used as one of Seed's vessels, too. She was telling me it was my job to eliminate that possibility.

...True, that was something only I could do. Kimizuka was one thing, but both Nagisa and Yui were too kind. It was better if any direct killing was my job.

"But then, is Kimizuka okay? He's got a seed, too."

He'd recklessly swallowed Chameleon's seed, attaching it to himself by force. In that case, there was at least a possibility that he'd be chosen as Seed's vessel.

"Ha! He'd probably love to have you kill him," Fuubi murmured. I couldn't tell whether she was joking or serious.

...But if Kimizuka were really chosen as a candidate vessel... Or if the seed took over his mind or his body and he turned into a monster, like Chameleon had... If that happened, I'd—

“That’s what I’m telling you, Charlotte Arisaka Anderson.”

The next instant, Fuubi’s dagger skimmed past my cheek.

Hastily turning, I saw that a tentacle had grown from the back of the man I’d knocked out. The knife Fuubi had thrown sliced it clean in two. Then she walked up to the nameless SPES survivor and mercilessly shot him dead.

“Did you sympathize with him? You’re supposed to destroy the enemy.” She turned back, and her eyes were as sharp as a hawk’s. “Nobody needs that kindness. Get rid of it. Take your softness and trash it. Don’t let pity make you careless. Kimihiko Kimizuka, Nagisa Natsunagi, Yui Saikawa—none of them can do this. You do it. If you want to be part of their circle, then at least do what they can’t.”

...She was right. That earlier incident certainly hadn’t earned Fuubi’s approval. It was likely that she’d never allow me to be naive.

“If you pick up a gun, fire it. If you draw your sword, swing it. Once the battle starts, don’t consider it over until someone is dead. Be heartless about judging what you can and can’t protect. Even if it means you end up making the entire world your enemy.” Fuubi narrowed her eyes.

“So it’s not possible to protect everything?”

“Say that after you’ve gotten strong enough to do it.”

...Right again. I couldn’t even beat her in an argument.

Still, her conviction was real. She’d sworn off cooperating, didn’t trust anyone, and lived only for the mission she believed in. Her role as Tuner was the Assassin, someone who nearly always worked alone, and she’d protected the world from the shadows for who knows how long.

“Listen, why are you helping us take down SPES?”

Since that was true, though, a question tugged at me. She never supported anyone, so why was she still helping with the job Ma’am had left undone?

“Same as you.” As Fuubi spoke, she lit a cigarette she’d managed to snitch back from me. “I wasn’t able to kill that thing, either.”

Then, exhaling smoke, she began to talk about her past with unexpected

candor.

The “thing” she’d mentioned had to be the former Ace Detective. Five years ago, the organization I’d been part of had ordered me to assassinate Ma’am.

“At the time, she’d just run away from SPES’s facility. As the Assassin, I was ordered to dispose of her.”

“You mean it was a Tuner job? Why would the top brass make that call?”

“We already knew the thing was one of Seed’s candidate vessels. They probably meant to defeat Seed indirectly by nipping that in the bud, as it were.”

...I see. So they’d attempted the same sort of maneuver that they’d just tried with Yui on Ma’am.

“But she survived.” Fuubi watched the smoke from her cigarette climb into the sky. “I chased her to the ends of the earth, the bottom of the sea, the top of the sky, but she ran and ran, launched a few solid counterattacks, and got clean away. ‘I don’t intend to die until I complete my mission, even if I take a hit from a missile,’ she told me. She was wearing this really irritating smile.”

Even as she said that, the set of her own lips softened.

“After her brilliant escape from the Assassin, she was made a Tuner, in part because they’d acknowledged her skills. After that, the task of taking down SPES was officially assigned to the Ace Detective.” Fuubi’s tone changed again as she grumbled, “Steal other people’s jobs, will she.” The grumpiness sounded manufactured.

After hearing that story, I had one question. “Did you really give it everything you had and still fail to kill Ma’am?”

Five years ago, I’d had far less experience than I had now, but she’d already been famous in the underworld as the Assassin. Had she genuinely failed in her mission again and again?

Could this woman have picked up on *something* in Siesta, the way I had? Was that why she’d consistently let her live?

When I asked, Fuubi said, “I’ll admit I thought *Huh! Interesting girl.*” On that uncharacteristically light note, she wrapped up the conversation. “All right.

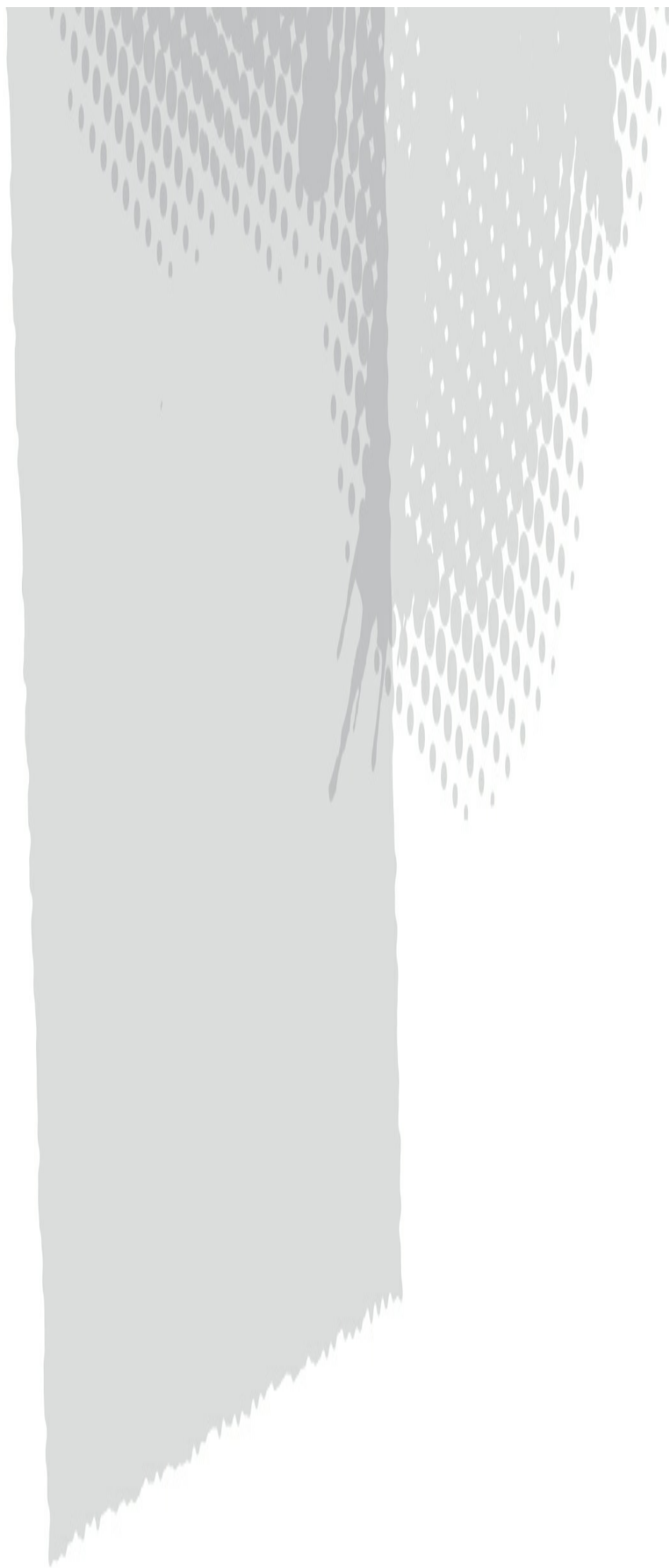
We've wasted a little too much time on talk." She stubbed her cigarette out in her portable ashtray. "I need to step out and run an errand, but you stick with the job." *Keep taking down SPES survivors*, in other words. She turned to go.

"Is that errand of yours a summons from the top? From the *Federal Council*?" On impulse, I called after her.

It could be a reprimand, since subjugating SPES was the Ace Detective's duty, and Fuubi was still helping without permission. Or it might be the other way around. Even as the Assassin, she might have been ordered to *clean up* the job the Ace Detective had left unfinished. They might cross-examine her for having failed in that mission, since she hadn't killed Yui Saikawa.

"A summons? No." Fuubi paused for a moment. "I'm just headed out for a little fight," she muttered belligerently, slinging her jacket over her right shoulder.





Chapter 2

◆ Mystery-solving with a side of fish and chips

Natsunagi and I had relocated to a restaurant near the hotel for lunch, and we were facing each other across a table. It had been the Ace Detective's suggestion not to solve mysteries on an empty stomach.

"I never thought I'd see this thing again." I sighed, shooting a sidelong glance at the volume that sat on the table.

The back cover had been removed, and most of the pages after a certain point had gone missing...but it was definitely the sacred text. When I opened it, I saw a written account of some of the things Siesta and I had experienced during the past few years.

"Another coincidence... No, there's just no way, is there?" Natsunagi frowned, although she was still snacking on fries.

I'd first seen the sacred text a year ago. The one who'd had it then was Hel, Nagisa Natsunagi's shadow personality. The sacred text was said to contain written accounts of future events. Its actual owner was Seed, and Hel and the other SPES executives had been basing their invasion of Earth on its instructions.

Now, roughly a year later, here it was again. As Natsunagi said, we couldn't brush it off as coincidence. Why had this book come to us? Could it be a trap set by Seed? Or maybe...

"—The Oracle," I said.

"I was thinking the same thing, actually," Natsunagi agreed. "The sacred text describes future events. In terms of who's most likely to be writing something like that, I can't think of anybody but the Oracle."

Yeah, that was my theory, too. Of course, we couldn't completely rule out the possibility that Seed was clairvoyant... But if I had to pick one, we had testimony

about the Oracle from both Ms. Fuubi and Olivia, so she was probably the more credible option.

“In other words, the most likely explanation may be that the Oracle is the real owner of the sacred text, and at some point, Seed managed to steal it from her.”

There was one other reason to assume the Oracle owned this book. I turned to what was currently the last page, since so many were missing. What it said was—

“‘The monster Medusa will attack the city of London,’ hmm?” Natsunagi narrowed her eyes at the page. It was dated one week ago.

If that prophecy was true, the city was being threatened by the Medusa right this minute.

“Meaning this is another test the Oracle’s people set up for us, to determine whether we’re really worth meeting.”

“That’s probably the most natural conclusion. This is a message from the Oracle: ‘If thou wouldst meet me, thou must vanquish the dread Medusa, which hath plunged the city of London into terror most dire.’”

“What was the creepy voice for? Don’t tell me you were imitating the Oracle.”

“Don’t call it creepy; I was just doing an impression! But I bet that’s what she’s like. Not that I’d know.”

She’d never even met us, but she had posed aggravating puzzles for us through her servants. I was sure she was a spoiled, stuck-up little girl lounging arrogantly on her throne. Again, not that I’d know.

“But anyway, are you sure it’s okay to prioritize this?” Natsunagi asked. “We were supposed to go retrieve Siesta’s legacy first, and then we decided to look for the Oracle instead. But now we’re heading off on another trail. Aren’t we getting further and further from the answer?”

...Yeah, she definitely had a point.

We had about ten more days until we hit the deadline Ms. Fuubi had set us for taking down Seed. In that time, I had to find the legacy Siesta had left and

meet the Oracle who held the key to her resurrection. We might not actually have time to deal with an unidentified monster on foreign soil.

“The thing is—if I look away from a case that’s sitting right in front of me, I can’t go back to that apartment.” I’d already gotten started. If I gave up on it and went home, Siesta would be mad at me. If somebody was being attacked by the Medusa as we spoke, I couldn’t ignore that.

“...Okay,” Natsunagi murmured, so quietly it almost sounded like an exhalation. “Well, if you’re fine with that, Kimizuka, then so am I, I guess.” She was wearing a rather tired-looking smile. Apparently we’d reached a consensus about what to do.

“Besides, I’ve already got an idea.”

Natsunagi looked puzzled, and I told her about a certain experience I’d had, way back when.

“The thing is, two years ago, Siesta and I encountered a Medusa.”

Medusa was a monster whose gaze turned people to stone.

However, the one we’d run into *hadn’t been a real monster*. In a certain European-style mansion, the Medusa we’d met was a pitiful man whose adopted daughter had been left in a persistent vegetative state because of an accident. He’d felt so sorry for her that he’d been using poison to do the same thing to other people.

“I see... But you and Siesta already resolved that, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. Or Siesta did, anyway. I was just deadweight.”

As Natsunagi said, Siesta had solved that particular incident brilliantly. That meant either this was a copycat crime...or it might be a real monster, someone with the power of one of SPES’s seeds. Either way, we’d have to check into it carefully.

“Well, we’re done fueling up, so let’s get out there and do some field work.”

The detective and her assistant would have to do the kind of legwork detectives did back in the day. We should probably kick off our investigation by asking some questions. How common was public knowledge about this

incident, anyway? What sort of damage had the Medusa specifically done? I started to get up, but then...

“Kimizuka, listen. Are you feeling okay?” Natsunagi asked. She kept stealing glances at me. The question had come out of nowhere, and I wondered what was up. “I’ve been waiting for the right moment to ask for a while now.” She was being unusually considerate.

“Well, physically, I’ve got so much energy it’s kind of scary.”

Was she asking because of the fight with Ms. Fuubi two days back? True, I thought I’d broken a bone or two at the time, but...none of it was giving me trouble in my day-to-day life, aside from a few aches and pains.

“Really? *No side effects either?*”

...Oh. That part, huh? When I saw the worry in Natsunagi’s eyes, it finally hit me.

During the fight, I’d swallowed Chameleon’s seed to trick Fuubi. Those things were originally created by Seed. Although they gave whoever ingested them special powers, eating one without taking proper precautions meant you’d pay for it with various side effects. You might lose your sight, the way Bat had. I’d heard you could also lose a good chunk of your life span.

But right now there were no signs of anything like that. I’m also not setting up any foreshadowing; I’m not gonna say, *I hadn’t been able to tell whether the fish and chips were good because I’d actually lost my sense of taste*. Of course, I might get hit with some plot twist later on, but at least for now, I was the picture of health.

“What, you’ve been worried about me?” I teased Natsunagi.

—But.

“Yes, I worry about you.” Natsunagi turned to me, and her face was surprisingly serious. She gazed steadily into my eyes. “It isn’t just me. Yui and Charlie are both concerned, too. You’re important to us. We worry about you at least as much as you worry about us, Kimizuka. You see?”

She told me there was no such thing as only taking, or only giving.

Feelings always go both ways.

Although I hated to admit it, the smile Natsunagi gave me then was so overwhelmingly cute it rivaled the former Ace Detective's.

"Did I just hear the sound of someone falling in love?"

"Unfortunately, that was just the conversation falling flat."

◆ Remembering a year ago, memories for two

The next day...

"What a great morning," I said to Natsunagi.

We were sitting side by side on the top story of a double-decker bus, gazing out at the city streets.

Yesterday, Natsunagi and I had gotten right to work investigating the Medusa. Asking around had yielded one clue, and now we were taking the bus to a certain destination. We weren't in the mood for sightseeing, of course, but every glimpse of the city was bursting with local color. I wanted to share those sights with Natsunagi, only...

"....."

Natsunagi was gazing straight ahead; she seemed dazed. It was as if her mind wasn't here.

"Those clothes look good on you." Suspecting I'd done something wrong, I complimented her and tried to put her in a good mood. I didn't know too much about exact clothing types or what they were called, but she was wearing a black dress-like thing. It was a little different from what she regularly wore, but it was perfect for the country we were in.

"Kimizuka, in the extremely unlikely event that you ever get a girlfriend, I bet you start fighting in two seconds, then split up two seconds after that."

"I'm going to ignore that second part and object to the idea that my chances of ever getting a girlfriend are that small."

Apparently, she hadn't been ignoring me intentionally. I finally had Natsunagi's attention.

“You’ve been spacing out. What’s the matter? Didn’t you get enough sleep?”

“Oh. True, it was hard to drift off when you kept talking in your sleep. That was part of it.”

“...I don’t remember that at all.” That’s one way to take damage from sleeping in the same bed. I hoped I hadn’t said stuff about Siesta.

“You kept prostrating yourself and apologizing to Yui. Why, I don’t know.”

“That’s a hundred times worse than what I was thinking.”

Come to think of it, I’d fought with Saikawa before we left Japan. I wished I could hurry and make up with her.

“And also...” Natsunagi gave a wry smile.

“Last night, I dreamed about *her*.”

Natsunagi was probably referring to her alter, Hel.

“It might be because we saw the sacred text yesterday. It made me think of her.”

That’s right. Natsunagi dreams.

Earlier, she’d said she’d spoken with Siesta, who lives in her heart, in a *daydream*. They had another world that no one else could touch.

“So what did you and Hel talk about?”

“...She got really mad at me.” Natsunagi puffed her cheeks out, looking cross.

Yeesh. What happened to that conversation in front of the mirror? I’d just assumed they’d made up.

“She told me not to take on burdens without asking.” With a rather disgusted sigh, Natsunagi spoke on Hel’s behalf. “She told me she’d take responsibility for her own crimes.”

...Ah. That did sound like her; she was stubborn. She’d accepted the fierce emotions Natsunagi had shown in front of that mirror. This must be the answer she’d come up with after that. Hel had taken innocent lives once and had resolved to face those crimes herself. That stubbornness was also her way of showing compassion toward her main personality.

“Well, I wasn’t okay with that, myself. And then it turned into a fistfight.”

“That’s what happened with Siesta, too.”

Apparently, the three heads of the guard dog were still snarling and snapping at one another.

“Still, I never thought I’d set foot in this country again.”

As I watched the scenery stream past, I was remembering the last time I was here, with Siesta. It had been a year or so since I’d seen these streets, but I’d lived here for several months, and everything was very familiar. Even the signs and streetlamps along the road had something nostalgic about them.

“It’s been a long time for me, too.” Natsunagi’s expression softened. “You and I walked down this street together last year, didn’t we, Kimizuka?” She seemed to be remembering something far in the past.

She was right: Siesta and I weren’t the only ones who were here a year ago. Back then, Alicia—or rather Natsunagi, who’d used the seed to assume Alicia’s form—had gone around with the two of us.

“I know I’ve asked this before, but you only looked like Alicia back then, and you were Natsunagi on the inside. Right?”



“Right. That was definitely me. Of course, I didn’t realize it myself until just recently,” she said, giving a wry little smile.

True, the girl I’d known last year hadn’t used the formal pronoun the real Alicia had used, or Hel’s boyish one, but Natsunagi’s regular-girl pronoun. She might have looked like the pink-haired Alicia, but she’d been Nagisa Natsunagi on the inside.

“I wonder, though. Alicia was twelve or thirteen; her apparent age may have affected the way I talked and acted a little. Even I’m not really sure.” Natsunagi thought back.

“You did seem kind of young... Although your mental age is still plenty young now, I guess.”

“Wow. This from a guy who kept trying to get Siesta to spoil him like a kid.”

“I don’t remember that, and nobody got it on tape.”

“I swear I’ll make her tell me all about it someday.”

...Natsunagi had picked up a weird new motivation for getting the detective back.

“Oh, look, that jewelry store. Isn’t that the one we went into?” Natsunagi was pointing at a glass-fronted shop that faced the road. She was right; it was the place I’d visited with her during our hunt for the sapphire eye.

“If I remember right, you had no money and couldn’t buy anything that time.”

“Yeah. I was poor then, and I’m poor now.” It wouldn’t be a bad idea to have Natsunagi set up a detective agency one of these days, so I could pull in a daily wage.

“Well, you gave me a ring you bought at a street stall instead, so it worked out.” Natsunagi looked up at me through her lashes, seeming rather happy.

“...I forgot about that.”

“You said, ‘From here on out, uh...looking forward to working with you,’ and slipped it onto my ring finger...”

“—You made me say that! Forget it, right now!”

“Noooo way.”

As we were talking about dumb stuff like that, the bus pulled up to our stop. From there, we walked a few more minutes until finally we reached—

“This is the place,” Natsunagi murmured, looking up at a white *hospital*.

This was one of the things we’d learned from our inquiries yesterday—one of the Medusa’s victims had been admitted to this place.

“Well, shall we go?”

We walked into the building, then into the elevator that would take us to the hospital room we’d looked up.

“Still, it doesn’t sound as if news of the incident has spread as far as we thought.” Natsunagi was thinking back over yesterday’s investigation.

As a matter of fact, although we’d asked quite a few people around town, not even one in twenty had said the word “Medusa.” No related keywords rang a bell for them, either.

“Yeah. *If we hadn’t broken into that newspaper*, I bet we still wouldn’t know about this place.”

The day before, Natsunagi had complained that we were getting nowhere and suggested a breakin. If she hadn’t, there was no way things would have gone this smoothly.

“The media must have the intel. All we have to do is eavesdrop on them!”

“Don’t say that so cheerfully. Eavesdropping isn’t something to be casual about.”

“Ah, well, it actually did work... Thanks to your ability, Kimizuka.”

“Yeah. It really is perfect for covert maneuvers, huh.”

Chameleon’s seed gave me the ability to turn invisible. As long as I could do that, sneaking up and listening in on conversations was easier than twisting a baby’s arm.

“Now we’ll just have to hope you didn’t acquire a taste for invisibly sneaking into the women’s bath.”

“Quit imagining stuff that could actually happen. Seriously, knock it off. Don’t pray with a serious look on your face.”

While we were still talking, the elevator reached our floor. Then we walked to the room, steeled ourselves, stepped inside, and saw...

“So this is the Medusa victim?”

The patient was a man in his forties.

Quietly, we went closer.

The man on the bed was breathing on his own, and every so often, he blinked, but that was all. He didn’t speak, and he didn’t move so much as a finger. It really did seem as if he’d been *turned to stone*.

“A persistent vegetative state, hmm?”

From what I’d heard, the man had been hospitalized about a week ago. That matched the date the sacred text had given for the Medusa’s appearance. Was it possible that our mystery monster had petrified this man using a power of some sort? But who had done it, and why?

As my thoughts ran around in circles—

“Say, Kimizuka?” Natsunagi was gazing at the face of the man on the bed.

“Haven’t we seen him somewhere before?”

Apparently, nobody’s just an extra in this world.

◆ At this point, the story splits in two

After that, we continued our investigation.

We got the details from the hospitalized man’s attending physician and saw other patients who’d been brought in with the same symptoms. Ordinarily, confidentiality issues would have made it almost impossible to get anyone to reveal those things. However, Natsunagi’s *red eyes* got the information easily.

Based on the information and circumstantial evidence we’d gathered, Natsunagi and I talked it over and came up with a theory about the Medusa’s identity and motive. It was an answer we happened to reach only because it

was the two of us. Then, partly because Natsunagi wanted to, we stopped by a second place.

“I finally made it here,” she murmured.

We were in the graveyard of a church on the outskirts of London. It was dusk, and gravestones stood in neat rows on the wide, grassy field.

Natsunagi knelt in front of one of them. “I’m sorry it took me so long—Daisy.”

Daisy Bennett.

She had been the last of the five victims in the Jack the Devil incident that had occurred in London a year ago. Natsunagi had finished paying her respects to the other four, and now she offered flowers to the final one.

“Natsunagi.” Gently, I set a hand on her shoulder.

“...Yes, I know.”

The criminal behind those serial murders had been Hel, Natsunagi’s other personality. Hel’s heart had been damaged during her first fight with Siesta; in order to survive, she’d taken the lives of five people, then used their hearts like batteries.

That said, Hel had committed those crimes on her own initiative. Natsunagi hadn’t even known they were happening. In a way, she was a victim as well; her mind and personality had been stolen.

“I’ve come to terms with the past. Now I’ll do my best to atone.”

There was no grim resolution in Natsunagi’s profile. This wasn’t the only reason she’d come here.

“That means I’ll be fine. Go finish your job, Kimizuka.” Natsunagi smiled at me.

“Are you really sure? You won’t get lonely if I leave? You won’t cry at night?”

“What am I, a kid? I’m not the one who went around searching the whole apartment because he didn’t see Siesta anywhere, Kimizuka.”

Don’t talk like you saw that. That never happened... I’m pretty sure.

“Besides, we did find the key.”

“...Yeah. *Coincidentally. Right as we were doing this.*”

Exactly. As we were on our way to this graveyard, I'd gotten a call saying that my stolen wallet and the master key had turned up. Natsunagi and I were being forced to temporarily part ways here *because somebody wanted it that way*. Sheesh. They had some nerve, splitting up a detective and her assistant.

“You sure are a worrywart, Kimizuka.” It must have shown on my face, although I hadn't meant it to. Still hugging her knees, Natsunagi gazed at me with a wry smile. “I'll be fine. After all, I'm not alone.”

“...Yeah, that's true.”

It was. Even if I wasn't there, Natsunagi wasn't alone. There was *one other person* here who'd resolved to fight alongside her.

“All right. If anything happens, call me. I'll come running in a giant robot.”

“Uh-huh. Please keep the scale of the worldview where it is, okay? Try to think on it and do better next time.”

She can say that, but this is a world where we have to fight aliens and vampires and monsters we hadn't even seen yet, so let me have this once in a while. Just every so often.

“Okay, see you later.”

“Mm-hmm, later.”

We exchanged brief good-byes, and I walked away.

I trusted that those girls would be able to make it through what was bound to happen next.

◇ **Narrator switch**

It happened about fifteen minutes after Kimizuka had left.

“My. Are you a friend of my daughter?”

A woman of about sixty came walking toward me, carrying flowers.

I stood up, greeting her with a nod. “It's been a long time, Rose Bennett.”

This was the mother of Daisy, Jack the Devil's fifth victim. Last year, while on

the trail of the culprit, Kimizuka, Siesta, and I had paid a visit to her house.

“We imposed on you at a really awful time earlier, and I apologize,” I told her, bowing more deeply.

On that visit, the strain of losing her daughter had taken its toll on her, and she’d collapsed right in front of us.

“...Have we met before, young lady?” The woman gave a slightly troubled smile.

Come to think of it, I should have expected that reaction. When I visited her, I’d been using Cerberus’s seed to make myself look like Alicia. No wonder she hadn’t connected that version with me. “...I guess it’s already been more than a year since that incident,” I said, trying to cover for myself. As I spoke, I watched Rose lay the flowers in front of the gravestone.

“Time has wings, doesn’t it? Even those painful days are receding into the past.” The woman’s smile had suffering etched into it. “At the time, while my grief was still raw, I was run ragged every day responding to the media about the affair.”

“Yes, so I’ve heard. I also heard *about that MP.*”

For a moment, Rose’s face tensed.

I was talking about a man who’d stepped forward as a replacement candidate for Daisy Bennett, who’d been the local representative in parliament. He’d given tearful speeches about carrying on her legacy and had won by a landslide... Except he’d only used those *performances* to climb the ladder. Behind the scenes, he was getting rich off illegal contributions. He’d even mocked Daisy and called her “a good stepping stone.”

“...Yes, young lady, that’s right. You know a lot about it. Where did you learn that? One would think you were a detective,” Rose joked, straightening up. “It’s all right, though. Perhaps he regrets his actions; he seems to have been behaving himself lately.”

“I...see.”

“Oh, that’s right! Today happens to be my daughter’s birthday. I’m glad

there's someone besides me who remembers her," Rose said, smiling tenderly. My bland response didn't seem to have registered with her.

"Yes, I know."

Before coming here, I'd done a little research and learned that today was Daisy Bennett's birthday. Unlike Japan, England didn't have a custom of visiting graves during a predetermined season like Obon, and they often brought flowers to the deceased on their birthdays.

From that information, I'd known there was a good possibility that Rose Bennett would visit her daughter's grave today. Our meeting was no coincidence; I'd come here specifically to see her.

"Rose Bennett, you're the Medusa, aren't you?"

I hit her with that theory as a surprise.

"...Heh-heh. What are you saying?" Smiling faintly, Rose denied my accusation. "I know there are rumors about *such incidents* in the city, but what makes you think I'm this Medusa character?" It was a perfectly natural question. She was still wearing that smile.

Why was I claiming that Rose Bennett was the monster? And if it was true, what had driven her to become a Medusa who turned people to stone?

"It's as you said earlier."

Exactly. As Rose had just told me, the media and that MP had made her suffer, and they were the Medusa victims Kimizuka and I had seen in the hospital today. I'd remembered the reporter particularly well after seeing him in front of Rose's house a year ago.

In addition to those two, there were several other likely Medusa victims. Upon investigating, we'd learned that they'd all had some sort of quarrel with Daisy Bennett. If there was anyone who'd have a grudge against those people, it was...

"Rose. You became the Medusa in order to get revenge on your daughter's enemies... On the people who tried to dishonor her."

One day, without warning, she'd lost her only daughter. All she had left of her

was a mute corpse. With nowhere else to direct her grief, she'd tried to punish those who'd attempted to hurt her little girl, even after her death. Her daughter had become as cold as stone, and so she'd tried to inflict the same suffering on them. That was what had created the Medusa.

"Is that all?" Rose Bennett's smile had vanished during my explanation. She closed in on me, her face grim. "That's nothing more than conjecture. You've merely set up a plausible-sounding motive; you have no concrete evidence."

"...You're right. There's no evidence here. But...", I went on. "If they search your house, they're sure to find the poison."

Before coming to the graveyard, I'd had one of the hospital's doctors tell me about the specific symptoms of the Medusa's victims. My red eyes had helped tremendously, and the fact was that *a certain toxin* had been detected in all of them.

According to Kimizuka, it had the same constituents as the poison gas the owner of that European mansion in the forest had used two years ago.

That made it clear that *the current Medusa* was also using a special toxin to damage her victims' minds. Even if we didn't track it down ourselves, material evidence was sure to turn up someday. And besides—

"Rose. I want to hear the truth straight from you."

Kimizuka had suggested bringing evidence to the graveyard with us, but I'd rejected the idea. I'd chosen to persuade Rose Bennett, no matter what.

"...Well, really, how could I forgive them?" Rose smiled thinly. I was sure it wasn't directed at me; she was laughing at herself. She didn't need me to tell her that what she was doing was wrong. Even so— "Yes, it's me. I'm the monster you speak of. The Medusa."

The mother couldn't let it go after the disrespect they'd shown her daughter, and she'd repaid them with poison-induced comas.

"How did you get that toxin?" I asked her. It wasn't the sort of thing someone living a normal life would ever encounter.

"When was it...? One day, it just turned up in the post," Rose murmured. Her

eyes were vacant.

So someone had intentionally set her on this path!

“Tell me,” the woman pleaded. “One day, my daughter suddenly dropped dead. She’s ashes now; she’ll never speak to me again. I want to hear her voice so badly, but I never will. Meanwhile, the people who disgraced her say whatever they please about her. Why? What on earth could be wrong with shutting their mouths?”

She caught my shoulders...but almost immediately, she crumpled weakly to the ground.

Rose Bennett would never forgive those who’d desecrated her daughter’s death. Oblivious strangers wailed loudly for their own benefit, while the girl herself would be silent forever. In her efforts to change that, Rose had become a monster.

What should I say to her?

If I found the right words for the torrent of feelings inside me—what Kimizuka kindly considered “passion”—could I save her? I’d managed to accept Yui when she held us at gunpoint. Could my words reach the woman on her knees and become a staff that would help her stand again?

No. They couldn’t.

After all, I’d failed to save Rose before. The intensity I’d shown when I was at her house last year hadn’t gotten through to her... But of course it hadn’t. I hadn’t looked like my true self then. I hadn’t even understood the crime I’d committed. It was incredibly arrogant for someone like me to try to save her.

Then what should I do?

Whose words could save this woman? Who could dry the tears of a mother who’d collapsed, weeping, in front of her daughter’s grave? ...There was only one answer.

“Please lend me strength.”

Untying the red ribbon that bound my hair, I turned to my other partner for help.

◇ A message from Niflheim

“That’s why I told you I’d do it to begin with.”

Squeezing the red ribbon in my hand, I grumbled to my master’s consciousness lying dormant somewhere in this body. Honestly, what had been the point of that fight? I couldn’t even sigh at my master’s passion—well, her stubbornness.

“Who are you?” The woman who was crouched in front of the gravestone looked up at me.

Only the contents of this body were different; my appearance hadn’t changed a bit. Maybe the sharp look in my eyes had clued her in.

Still, who was I, really? *What* was I?

It struck me as a very philosophical question.

“I couldn’t tell you. I’m myself, that’s all.”

I looked down at the woman; I was responding to my master’s request. “What you were given was an *inferior product*. It is a toxin, but its effects are only temporary. The minds of those men may be clouded now, but they’ll wake up soon.”

A certain member of SPES, to whom Father had given a seed, had created that toxin inside his own body.

That *pseudohuman’s* code name was “Jellyfish.”

Scientific name: Medusa.

Jellyfish poison loses its effect after a certain amount of time has passed. The man had been making SPES’s lowest-ranking members sell it in order to earn a little cash.

He’d probably capitalized on this woman’s weakness after the loss of her daughter. The poison might have appealed to her. I hoped he hadn’t billed her for it yet... No, I was in no position to worry about things like that.

“—Come any closer, and I’ll shoot!” Rose Bennett took a handgun out of the purse by her feet.

“I see. So they gave you that, too?”

My entrance had only made the situation worse.

Conversations with others are surprisingly difficult. *If this goes on*, I thought, *my master will scold me*. An awkward little smile escaped me.

“...!”

The smile may have been a poor move, though; Rose raised the gun, pointing it at me with trembling hands.

To be honest, I thought it might be for the best if she shot me. She had the right to. If she was going to get her revenge, now was the time.

—But.

“That bullet won’t hit me.”

She fired, but the bullet missed its target by a wide margin. The dry report and the smoke hung in the air.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t let my master die.”

“Stay back...”

Rose’s legs had given out in terror, and she scooted away from me on her behind.

Did she think I was going to kill her?

...Oh, that made sense, actually. Those of us in SPES had followed Father’s orders, obeyed our survival instincts, and used the special abilities granted by the seeds to kill this planet’s humans. If they instinctively feared us, that was only natural.

“That isn’t why I’m here now.”

There’s no way my master would have called me to do a thing like that.

The reason she’d called me here was for something she couldn’t do. A thing only I was capable of.

My master hadn’t completely mastered the use of this body’s seed yet. The red eyes were only a trigger; the seed’s real power lay in this throat. In our

voice.

“The true shape of my ability is ‘word-soul’—it imbues the words I speak with power.”

The seeds Father created granted special powers to human organs. They were what the members of SPES had used to keep up their attacks on mankind, on his instructions.

However, hypothetically...

If there was another way to use this power, a way besides hurting people...

If my word-soul ability had the power to save someone...

“Stop, stay away from me...! Daisy!” I was right in front of Rose Bennett now. As she looked up at me, she called her daughter’s name. I knelt gently, putting myself at her eye level.

Oh, I see.

This is human terror.

Had her daughter feared me this way, a year ago?

In London, I’d been in a trancelike state—until I came to with a corpse in front of me. In order to save this body and my master’s life, I’d extracted the heart from that corpse. And then I’d done the same again, over and over. Had those five people been this terrified of me just before they died as well?

“I’m sorry for frightening you,” I told Rose Bennett. She was trembling.

The apology was also directed at those five people, last year.

“.....?”

Rose probably didn’t understand, though. Even now, her eyes were darting around anxiously... These things really never go well.

I wasn’t a logical hero who’d consistently turned out the best possible solutions based on knowledge and experience, nor was I an ace detective who tried to make her lofty ideals a reality with her intense emotions.

In the end, I was only an imitation. A shapeless mass of consciousness that had come to dwell in a girl named Nagisa Natsunagi. My existence was so fragile

that, if I hadn't been bound by the desire to be needed, a gust of wind might have blown me away.

"But now, I have a bond."

I squeezed the red ribbon again. Right now, I was standing here because my master needed me.

That's right. I couldn't imitate that white-haired detective, and I couldn't be like my master, the one this ribbon suited. As I said earlier, I was only myself.

And so, right now, I would do what only I could do.

I was sure that was the one and only right given to me, as well as a duty I had to perform.

"Rose Bennett. This is a present not from me, but from her."

My ability was word-soul—the ability to imbue words with powers. Which meant I could also exchange words with someone I'd exchanged blood with. One year ago, when I'd switched hearts, I'd also traded blood with Daisy Bennett, *and so I remembered her final words.*

"I'm sure she would have told you this."

Under the sunset sky, before a gravestone on a grassy field, I knelt down and delivered Daisy Bennett's last words to her mother.

"I love you, Mum."

My name is Hel.

Code name: Hell.

My name belongs to the queen who rules the land of the dead—the link between the living and the departed.

◇ The name of that emotion is...

My vision suddenly expanded. I saw the orange glow of the sunset. Insects were singing in the distance, and I realized that my consciousness was back in my body.

"...Hel."

My partner had finished her job without trouble and retreated to some shadowy corner of our body.

“Whoops!”

Just then, Rose Bennett stumbled, falling weakly against my shoulder. Her eyes were closed. “Daisy...,” she murmured. The name of her only daughter.

Then, as if she’d fainted, she fell asleep in my arms.

“I’m sorry.”

I wish I could have saved you properly that time.

As I apologized, I was remembering that I’d held her like this a year ago, too.

Just for a few moments, I leaned Rose against the gravestone and called a taxi on my cell. If I let her rest at home, I was sure she’d wake up soon.

Speaking of waking up, Hel had told me the people left in vegetative states by the toxin would recover naturally with time. In other words, this incident was resolved.

Just one more time, I gave a brief, silent prayer at the grave. “I can’t say I’ve done enough to atone...” The emotion in my voice was less apologetic and more resolved toward the future.

There was no way this would absolve me of the crimes I’d committed a year ago. Nothing ever would. All I could do was keep saving people, without letting the position of “detective” limit me.

Right now, the jobs that took priority were defeating Seed and bringing Siesta back to life. That last one would take a miracle that would go above and beyond even the flawless Ace Detective’s intentions. To make it a reality—

“I’m counting on you, Kimizuka.”

I was sure my strength alone wouldn’t be enough. I looked up at the sky, thinking of the partner who always had my back. At this very moment, he was busy collecting clues about those jobs.

Kimihiko Kimizuka—my assistant and sidekick.

I’d met him in a classroom after school not too long ago, but for some reason,

it hadn't felt like the first time we'd spoken. Later on, I'd learned that the heart inside me had spent three whole years traveling with him.

I'd been telling myself that that was why it beat faster whenever I saw him, that it had nothing to do with my own feelings. But it turned out I'd personally met Kimizuka a year ago, here in London. I'd been trapped in darkness then, and his words had saved me. Meaning the real reason my heart sped up when he was near me was...

"...Nah."

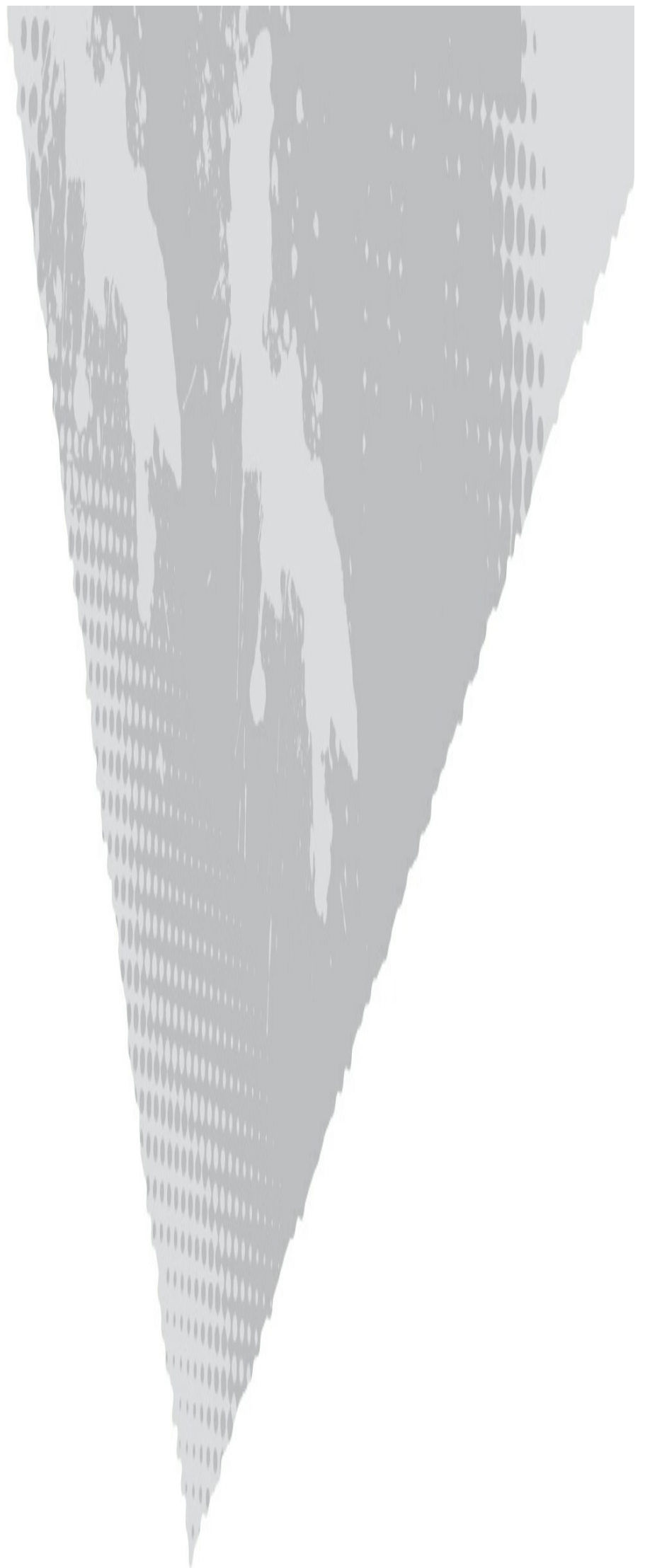
The answer was right there, but I decided not to reach for it. Doing that at this point felt like it would be breaking the rules.

Everything would have to wait...

"Until we bring Siesta back."

On that note, I set off toward the place where I knew Kimizuka would be.

—And just then, I heard a faint explosion in the distance.



Side Yui

After Kimizuka and Nagisa left for London and Ms. Kase and Charlie went out, Bat and I stayed on in Ms. Kase's apartment.

We were still there because Bat was going to put me through special training, hoping to awaken the ability of my left eye. That had been the plan, but...

"Ah, this one's top-shelf, too."

Bat had hauled expensive-looking red wines out of the wine cellar and was having his own private tasting session, smiling in satisfaction. *What happened to the special training, hmm?*

"Won't Ms. Kase be angry if you open her wine without permission?" I asked, sitting down right in front of him.

"Don't care. That woman kept me cooped up for ages. Don't you think I've earned a little luxury?" Bat gently swirled the wine in his glass.

His relaxed attitude made him seem like a rather uninhibited, stylish older man. He carried himself like a mature adult, something Kimizuka probably couldn't do to save his life.

"—No, no, you aren't putting me off that easily! What about my special training, hmm?! Come on!" Abandoning my usual jokey role, I pressed Bat for answers. "Let's get started on the training arc! Which mountain will we be retreating to?! When will I sit under a waterfall?! Will I need my swimsuit?! Oh, but pin-up photos would make my mother and father worry up in heaven, so those are out!"

"There were so many problems with that monologue that I don't even know where to begin." My, my. Somewhere in there, we seem to have swapped roles. "Don't rush me, all right? I've got time to finish this glass."

With the composure of a man who had a complete grasp of all future events, Bat slowly rolled the wine around his tongue.



“Then why did you volunteer to be my instructor, Bat?” If he wasn’t going to start training me, it must be all right for us to chat in the meantime. Yes, this was a rare opportunity. I wanted to talk about all sorts of things with this stylish older man.

“I already explained that we’ve got a common interest in defeating SPES.”

...Bat was pretty cold, though.

How strange. Kimizuka would have practically talked my ear off there. Not that I care about the sort of person who’d just take off on an overseas trip with another woman.

“However, since we’re here...I’ve got a question of my own,” Bat said, setting his glass down.

“You really don’t want to avenge your parents?”

He’d had quite a bit to drink already, but he hadn’t asked that question under the influence. He seemed as if he genuinely wanted to know. He might even have set up this situation specifically so that he could ask the question... *No, I’m overthinking.*

“Even if a mortal enemy of your family or friends was right there in front of you, you wouldn’t pull the trigger?” Bat asked again.

“Mm, I’m not sure. Last time, neither you nor Chameleon had hurt them directly, so... Unless it actually happened, I really couldn’t say.” I was remembering the incident on the roof of the TV station the other day.

“I see. Well, aren’t you cool?”

“Am I really? I think I’m only able to say that because I’m not facing an enemy right now. I took up the mic instead of the pistol, but that doesn’t mean I won’t pick up the pistol again if I have to.”

“So you won’t live for revenge, but you’re not writing off the idea entirely?”

“That’s right. In the end, I think it simply comes down to what I want to do.”

It was an arrogant thing to say; I had said something along those lines to Kimizuka, but I’d still been wavering at the time. Now that I’d made it through

that incident and Kimizuka had given me his support, I was able to say it with confidence. “That’s why I won’t build my life around revenge. I want to live the way my parents hoped I would.”

“And that’s different from letting the dead tie you down?”

“Yes, it is.” *It really is. That’s the one thing I can say with pride.* “After all, that’s what I believe now!”

This is definitely my will, and a thought that belongs to me alone.

“—I see,” Bat murmured pensively. Then he drained the rest of his wine in one gulp.

“Um, did that answer your question? I ended up just monologuing...” All of a sudden, I felt very awkward.

“Yeah, that was really informative. It also told me you haven’t actually managed to cut the umbilical cord yet.”

“Wh-why would you think that?! Were you listening to me at all?!”

“I meant it in a good way, so don’t worry about it.”

“Adding ‘in a good way’ isn’t enough to convince me, you know! My selling point is that I’m the capable, mature character; don’t make me out to be a child!”

I swear, what a mean old man. The idea of picking on a sweet young girl like me! He’s as much of a jerk as Kimizuka.

...You know, I keep mentioning Kimizuka, and he isn’t even here. The man is a rascal. I hope he comes home soon.

“Ha-ha! Well, now that we’ve got that pleasant chat out of the way, let’s get to the training,” Bat said, a bit more jovial than before. At least we were getting to the main topic. “Listen, young lady. The first thing I’m going to teach you is one of the basics of human movement...”

“Oh, if this is likely to go on for a while, may I take a hip bath while you talk? If you stay here and speak loudly, I’ll be able to hear you!”

“You’re so insolent, it’s kinda refreshing.”

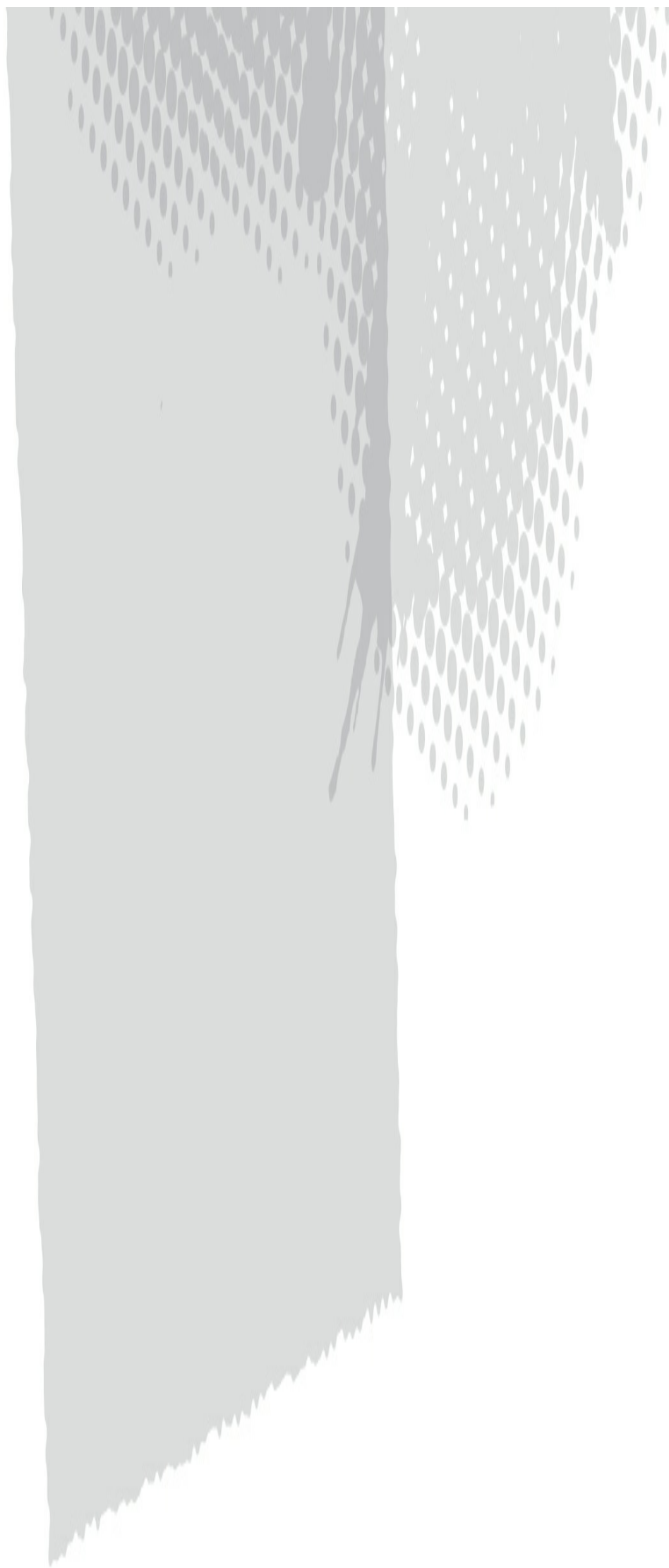
“Hee-hee! That’s a good comeback!”

This went well. It’s nice to have a friend from a different generation.

I was sure this was the beginning of a long relationship for Bat and me. Or...as I began to listen to what he said, I hoped it would be.

“Oh, by the way, what is your real name, Bat? I know a fun game that uses your name to tell your fortune.”

“I’m not the one who should be saying this, but when are we going to get started on that special training?”



Chapter 3

◆ Guardian of the world

After splitting up with Natsunagi, I went to a certain location to reclaim my stolen wallet and key. This was the address I'd been given over the phone, but...

"I don't have very good memories of this place."

The building in front of me wasn't a police station. It was Westminster Palace, the nerve center of the United Kingdom. About a year ago, Hel had kidnapped me and held me prisoner under this building, then fought a ferocious battle around its clock tower with Siesta.

"I guess I'll have to go, though." I stepped inside.

Right away, an English gentleman in a suit appeared and showed me to an area that was off-limits to the general public. After ushering me into a dedicated elevator, he bowed, then left. Apparently *the person who'd called me here* was at the top of Elizabeth Tower, the spire annexed to the palace.

"Geez. Mia Whitlock sure is picky about presentation," I grumbled to myself as I rode the elevator up.

It didn't take any detective work to know who was waiting for me up here. In the first place, I suspected that the one who'd stolen my wallet—or rather, the key inside it—had been the cabin attendant, Olivia. She'd done it simply to determine whether we were worthy of meeting Mia.

Olivia had taken my key on the plane, nudged us to do what we'd done after that, and ensured that we found the sacred text. Then she'd watched to see whether we'd resolve the Medusa incident. When Natsunagi and I had figured out the Medusa's identity and were well on our way to shutting down the incident, she'd contacted me. Meaning the one waiting for me had to be the Oracle, Mia Whitlock.

"That was some skilled manipulation. It's almost invigorating."

But that ended now. I told myself I wouldn't leave until my demands were accepted, just as the elevator doors opened to reveal a spiral staircase.

I climbed it, heading up and up through the gloom.

And then...

"This is it, huh?"

There was a door in front of me. Steeling myself, I twisted the knob.

".....!"

I covered my face as a sudden gale howled and blustered around me.

It didn't take me long to realize it was just because we were a hundred meters up.

Orange light struck my covered face and shone through my closed eyelids.

"...Is this place open to the outside?"

As I gradually got used to the wind and the dazzling light, I finally opened my eyes. The place looked like a hotel room. On the opposite side, there was a balcony. On that balcony, looking out over the streets of London, was a girl. She was dressed in the white robe and scarlet *hakama* trousers of a shrine maiden.

Illuminated by the last rays of the setting sun, the Tuner protected the world from the top of the clock tower.

"Who's there?"

Just then, the girl seemed to sense me and looked over her shoulder.

Her pale blue hair swung, and her big, beautiful, doll-like eyes grew even wider.

"So we finally meet, Mia Whitlock," I said, approaching the guardian of the world.

"Tell me how to change the future."

We would get the ending everyone wants. The one where we retake Siesta.

◆ **The end of the world, prophecy of the *völva***

“It can’t be done.”

Once Mia Whitlock had changed from her shrine maiden outfit into street clothes, she answered me bluntly. At the moment, she was returning books to the large bookshelves that covered the room’s walls.

People said she could see the future. Once I’d reached her, I’d waited until she’d finished her regular evening duties in the clock tower, and then she’d allowed me to meet with her in this room. At that point, I’d figured my goal was as good as achieved, but...

“The future is changeless. We can fight it all we want, but the story’s ultimate ending won’t change.” The girl’s voice was cool. She had her back to me and was standing on tiptoe to return a book to a high shelf.

“Are you the only one here? I thought your servant would be with you.” Reaching in from behind her, I snatched the book from her hand and put it back on the shelf for her. Olivia the flight attendant was the one who’d invited me here. Before anything else, I had to get my wallet and that key back...

“She set me up.” Mia’s sweet, doll-like face twisted in a grimace. She looked up at me from twenty centimeters below. “I’m not sure what she’s trying to accomplish, but Olivia is trying to bring me and the two of you together.”

I see. True, even on the plane, Olivia had seemed to want us to meet Mia.

“In other words, I have no business with you myself, and you don’t interest me. I’d prefer not to see your face, if I can manage it, and I don’t want to breathe the same air. Could you go home soon?”

Slipping past me, Mia began sorting books again.

...I didn’t expect her to dislike me this much. Well, actually, it’s probably less that she hates me personally and more that she’s avoiding people in general. Yeah, that’s gotta be it.

“Sorry, but I can’t leave until I get what I came for.”

I picked up one of the books that were piled on the table.

“Mia Whitlock. These are sacred texts, right?”



All of them—both the books Mia and I were handling, and the ones already lining the walls.

“Remind me why I have to answer that?”

“My partner is solving a case right now, on instructions from Olivia.”

If that sacred text had been sent to us by someone in Mia Whitlock’s camp, then the fact that Natsunagi was solving the tough problem we’d found in it had to work to our advantage. Plus, I was helping her organize her library.

“...I don’t think forcibly putting someone in your debt is always an effective technique.”

Even so, as if she was out of options, Mia gave a little sigh.

“Yes, that’s right. There are 100,279 volumes. All the sacred texts here have been compiled by previous Oracles, or by me.”

As she spoke, she quietly pointed to the bookshelves all around the room. “My ability to predict the future lets me foresee the world’s crises, although only in fragments. Because of that ability, I was made the Oracle and given the role of recording the end of the world, the Ragnarok, in these sacred texts.”

It was just as Ms. Fuubi had said, then; the Oracle did have the ability to see the future. Now it was clear that she had a power I’d need in order to achieve my goal.

“But just knowing the future doesn’t mean it’s possible to change it. It doesn’t mean much to most people.” Talking down her own ability, Mia swept her blue hair back.

“Is there anyone else who has that sort of power?” I stopped working and leaned forward, pressing Mia for details.

“Those who don’t work don’t eat. Didn’t you learn that in preschool?” Mia sat down in a tall chair, leaned back, and closed her eyes.

“They don’t teach you that in preschool. Don’t overwork the three-year-olds.”

However, she probably meant that if I wanted an answer, I had to help her

with this job. I couldn't tell what her system was, but I kept shelving the books according to her instructions.

I was seeing a lot of ominous words on the spines of the volumes lining the shelves: "Viral Pandemic," "World War III," and even "Vampire Rebellion." Were these all global crises that the twelve Tuners had averted?

"By the way, the sacred text is first-degree classified material. You can read it, but be prepared to never sleep in a bed again."

"You say that like it's nothing..."

Apparently, the day I opened one of these books without permission, somebody big would have me liquefied. Anxious now, I slid a sacred text titled "Alternate History" onto the shelf.

"Only one person in the world ever has this power at a time. The moment that person dies, another person acquires the power—as a divine blessing." While I worked, Mia answered my earlier question. "It began with a *völva*, one of the seeresses in Northern European myths. Starting with her, many Oracles have been born over the course of several millennia. There was one in your country as well. What was her name again? I think it actually had the word *miko* in it."

Mia probably meant the queen who'd ruled Wakoku 1,800 years ago, a woman who'd used the power of divination. Was Agastya, the holy man Hel had once mentioned, one of the people who'd held the position?

"When did you acquire your power, Mia?"

"About ten years ago. One day, out of nowhere, I began murmuring that a certain natural disaster would occur soon, as if I were delirious... My parents heard me, and that's what started it."

In addition to filling me in on the details of her ability, Mia began to tell me about her past.

"They were like prophecies; they just appeared in my mind, as images. I'd put them into words, almost unconsciously, or I'd write them down on paper. I began foretelling large-scale acts of terror and times when the lives of important people would be in danger—and before long, I was known as a child

of God.”

“A child of God... So you caught somebody’s attention?”

Mia gave a self-deprecating smile. “I did. My parents, to be specific. The ones closest to me. When they discovered my ability, they created a religious body, set me up as its founding figure—and began to make money.”

A child of God who could see the future—of course certain people would consider someone like that a money tree. Even more unfortunately for Mia, the ones who’d done it had been her family.

“Sorry to interrupt, but... Mia, what should I do with this?” I’d picked up a bundle of a dozen or so sheets of parchment, tied with string. Unlike the other sacred texts, it didn’t have a cover, just the word *Singularity* scrawled on the first sheet.

“That’s rubbish.”

...It shouldn’t have been anything to do with me, but since I was holding it, it felt like she’d insulted me unfairly as well.

“What’s written in there can’t be trusted anyway.”

So this wasn’t connected to the sacred texts? I’d heard that those only held futures that were determined. For now, following Mia’s orders, I put the bundle of parchment back.

“However, the only thing my ability can do is foresee global crises. I couldn’t tell the futures of individual believers,” Mia went on. Her parents had begun a religion around their daughter’s ability to tell the future. However...

“Did that function as a religion, then? Weren’t the believers counting on prophecies from the child of God?”

“Yes. And so my parents repeatedly made up divine revelations and used them to swindle money from the believers. They threatened them, implying that they’d receive divine punishment if they didn’t do what they said.”

It was your typical crooked cult. What Mia told me next was also really typical—although it was the sort of tragic tale you wish would never happen anywhere.

Mia's parents had hit on the idea of making up prophecies and separating believers from their money. Mia, the central figure in all this, had objected again and again, but every time she did, the adults had hit her. "You can't betray your believers now," they'd said.

Mia was still a little kid, and she hadn't been able to fight them. They'd shut her in a basement room, and after that, all she could do was watch her parents get their hands dirtier and dirtier... But then those days were blotted out by something even worse.

One day, in an attempt at revenge, a believer who'd lost a fortune over a false prophecy set Mia's house on fire. In the blink of an eye, those flames had enveloped her parents.

"My mother had done bad things. My father had hit me many times. Even so, they were the only family I had—so I tried to save them. I tried to use my clairvoyance to find a way for them to escape the inferno."

Mia had gone over to stand by the great window. The fading sun illuminated her fragile profile.

"But no matter what I did, I couldn't see a future where they survived. As far as the world was concerned, my parents weren't important."

Right, all Mia could see were things related to global crises. Her parents were ordinary people. They didn't count.

"...And so only you were saved?"

"The fire never reached that basement room. I didn't even want divine protection or whatever it was, and yet..." Mia gave a self-mocking smile.

"How did you go from there to being a Tuner?"

Having lost her family, Mia Whitlock had been living on her own, without hope. How, and when, had she begun fighting the enemies of the world as the Oracle?

"Four and a half years ago, the Ace Detective *stole me*," Mia said, turning back toward me.

"...So Siesta was involved?"

From context, “stole” probably meant “took into protective custody.” Siesta had extended a helping hand to a girl who’d been all alone in the world.

“Did Siesta take you as one of her Ace Detective jobs?”

“I’m told the mission was originally assigned to the Phantom Thief. However, the Ace Detective stole me in his place. She said ‘That man’s the last person on the planet you should trust.’”

During the three years I’d spent traveling with Siesta, we’d dealt with phantom thieves countless times. However, right now, Mia probably meant the Tuner. I was pretty sure “Phantom Thief” had been one of the positions SIESTA listed for us once. But...

“What do you mean, the Phantom Thief can’t be trusted? He’s technically a hero, right?”

The twelve Tuners had all been appointed to save the world in its time of need. I’d heard that Scarlet the Vampire was a black sheep... Was the Phantom Thief another one?

“The Phantom Thief is a traitor, the only one of the twelve Tuners to blatantly violate the *Federal Charter*. He’s currently imprisoned deep underground for committing a serious crime. The Ace Detective is the one person who saw the danger he posed ahead of time. That’s why she rescued me herself, without relying on him.”

Was the Federal Charter Mia had mentioned the same thing Charlie had brought up earlier? From what I’d heard, its regulations held the group of Tuners together.

“What was the Phantom Thief’s crime?” I knew the conversation was getting further and further off topic, but I asked anyway. How had a hero who should have been keeping the world peaceful gotten locked up like a criminal?

“I’m the only one who’s allowed to touch the sacred texts, but he stole some of them.”

As Mia said that, for the first time, there was a hint of anger in her eyes. “Then he sold the sacred text that held prophecies about SPES to Seed...in exchange for a certain consideration.”

“So that’s where our stories link up, huh?”

Seed had used the Phantom Thief to steal some of Mia’s sacred texts. The other day, too, he’d tried to team up with the Vampire to break Bat out of jail. Apparently, he’d been attempting to use the Tuners for a few years already.

Once he’d gotten his hands on the sacred text and learned the future, Seed had been able to see danger coming before it reached him. Siesta had repeatedly fought an opponent with such a massive advantage, until finally, she’d—

“I’d like your opinion.” Suddenly, Mia turned and walked toward me. “Say a Tuner’s role is to risk everything to fight the enemies of the world, until they eventually meet the end one would expect. They may avert one crisis, but the enemies will keep coming. The fight won’t ever end. Until the world is destroyed, they’ll just keep pretending to save it, using every trick in the book, *while only the people who fill those positions change*. Can you find any hope in a future like that?”

Mia Whitlock’s lilac eyes were right in front of me, wavering.

This was her counterargument to the wish I’d brought her: “Can the future be changed?”

Her answer was: *No matter which future you choose, it will end badly. With the end of the world.*

She wasn’t exaggerating, though. Mia had been given the ability to see the future at a young age, and the people around her had seized the chance to use her. Siesta had saved her once, but then she’d sacrificed herself... And even that hadn’t been enough to destroy the world’s enemies. As the Oracle, Mia Whitlock would observe this hellish future for the rest of her life.

“So until my life ends, or the world does, I’ll carry out my duties within the walls of this tower. I don’t have any expectations to speak of. I have no ambitions of changing anything. I don’t hope, I don’t wish, I don’t rely on anyone. I only do the job the Ace Detective gave me. I work quietly, and I work alone.”

Without waiting for me to respond, Mia Whitlock gave me her final answer.

“...Okay. I finally understand your position on this,” I told her, getting to my feet.

It was just as she said: If that was the only sort of future waiting for us, any kind of action would be pointless. That was a normal perspective to take. Until the dark, inevitable day, Mia planned to stay holed up in this clock tower. How badly must she be hurting? I wondered. I really couldn't tell her she was wrong.

“Sorry, though. I may understand it, but I can't sympathize.”

I scooped Mia up in what's known as the “princess carry.”

“.....Huh?”

In my arms, Mia blinked at me rapidly.

What's the matter? You sound kinda silly. You realize you're breaking character, right?

She can't actually have thought she'd convince me with that.

“I'm going to show you just how uncertain the future really is.”

Right then—an alarm began to sound in the room, or maybe all through the building. Then the window Mia had just been leaning against shattered.



“Wh-what? What’s happening?”

Mia was flustered. Outside, something exploded, and the floor shook as if an earthquake had hit.

What? You didn’t see this coming? —Well, too bad.

“Just who do you think you’re with right now?”

Still carrying Mia, I headed for the exit.

“Don’t go underestimating my knack for getting dragged into things.”

If you’re a girl the gods loved, then I’m the guy they all abandoned.

Sorry, but I’m about to drag you into more trouble than you can even imagine.

“Where are you taking me?!” Mia screamed as I booked it out of the wheel of fate, carrying her with me.

◆ Looking for one solitary route

Having escaped from the tower without incident, the two of us were walking through the streets of London. The sun was long down.

“Wh-why is this happening...?” Mia Whitlock was looking around uneasily, following two steps behind me. Her cool attitude from earlier had vanished; her shoulders were hunched defensively, and she took short, quick steps. “What on earth was that?”

An explosion had occurred out of nowhere at the clock tower. As we’d fled the building, alarms had been going off, and we’d passed dense areas of flames and smoke.

“Search me. Terrorists, maybe?”

“—How can you be so calm?!” Mia’s tone sharpened, and she came up beside me. “Ngh! Yelling made me dizzy...”

As she finally let her emotions show through, Mia sank weakly to the pavement. Apparently, she really did nothing that required leaving her room.

“Terrorist acts aren’t exactly unusual, you know.”

“They aren’t exactly ‘usual,’ either.”

I held out my hand to Mia, and she took it to get to her feet again.

“You should get a little more exercise. Go outside once in a while.”

“Ew, no. It makes me tired.”

“Don’t say that with a straight face. What are you, a NEET?” That seemed to make Mia a little uncomfortable. She started off briskly on her own. “You should branch out. Pick up a hobby. Just one friend can make your world a little brighter.”

“Even if it did, it’s going to end soon anyway.”

“You are so negative!” Although in her case, she wasn’t actually exaggerating, which made it kind of hard to put in a good comeback.

“...Quiet down. You’ll startle me; don’t do that.” Mia turned halfway back, gazing at me reproachfully.

“Uh, sorry. I accidentally slipped into the way I talk with my usual crowd.”

“That’s the way you talk with them...? You all must have so much energy.”

So somebody’s finally mentioning that, huh? Well, it’s not an issue I can do anything about on my own. Are you listening, Yui Saikawa and company?

“...Haaah. Honestly, nothing good happens when you’re around.” Mia heaved a deep sigh. “Things were hard a year ago as well.” Clasp ing her hands behind her, she looked up at me coldly.

“Oh, right. That happened at that clock tower, too, didn’t it?”

A year ago, Siesta and Hel had fought here. Piloting a robot and a biological weapon, they’d gone on a full rampage at the tower. Back then, though, Mia had been inside. I was sure she’d watched the whole thing through the window.

“Imagine being the person who has to clean up after that.”

I see. Even though they’d been completely out of control, we hadn’t drawn a single rubbernecker, and no media outlet had reported an accident. Someone very powerful must have been working in the background. I really wished she’d direct her complaints to the white-haired ace detective, though.

“Let this be my apology, then.” Mia was walking on the side nearest the buildings, and I caught her hand and pulled her to me.

“Huh?” Her eyes widened, and then a broken flower pot smashed into the pavement right where she’d been standing.

“Okay, let’s go.” I released her hand and resumed my evening stroll.

“...I knew it. I get nothing but trouble when I’m with you.” Mia seemed to be fed up with my trouble-magnetism; the hunch in her back had gone from kitten to scared kitten. For the past little while, every move she’d made had reminded me of some forest critter.

However, as far as I was concerned, this was peanuts. If I was going to show her that the future really could change, I’d need her to stick with me for a while longer.

“Didn’t Siesta teach you things always change quickly?” I asked Mia. She was still just standing there.

“What kind of lesson is that? Boss— Ahem. The Ace Detective and I only gamed online together every once in a while.”

“How exactly do you Tuners relate to each other?” She’d just disclosed an unexpected “mentor/junior” relationship. I was Siesta’s assistant, Charlie was her apprentice... In that case, had Mia been one of those cute junior members who was actually a surprising amount of trouble?

As I was wondering about that, a tall red bus pulled up to a nearby stop. Great timing.

“Listen up. In our world, factors like common sense and feeling conflicted and stalemates tend to slow things down, so we just skip over those.”

“What’s ‘our world’? What’s with the abrupt explanation?”

“Never mind, just keep up. This story moves fast.” *Nailed it*, I thought as I stepped onto the stairs of the bus.

“I digress, but you don’t look like the type who has many friends.”

“If you’re going to digress, don’t be mean about it.”

“Then I’ll just move to the main topic: I can’t be your friend.”

“Yeah, just help me realize a stupid dream. That’ll be enough.”

We sat down next to each other in the last row of seats on the first floor of the bus.

“—Say, are you always like that?” Mia asked. She’d taken the window seat and was gazing out at the dark streets.

“Like what? Dashing, considerate, and actually pretty cool?”

“You don’t have to force yourself to play dumb.”

I wasn’t playing dumb.

“I’m asking whether you always act without a plan.”

Without a plan, huh? True, even now, I had no idea where this bus was going. I didn’t know what stops we’d pass, or when, or what sort of people would board on the way. —However.

“I’ve got an ultimate goal. Someday, I’ll bring Siesta back to life.”

That’s the only future I want, and the end of the story I’m aiming for.

“And you really think that can be done?” Mia didn’t seem startled by my vow. She’d probably already known about it. Maybe that was why she’d gone so far to avoid Natsunagi and me; she’d realized it was an outrageous wish.

“I really couldn’t tell you.”

I don’t know. I think that’s why I came to see you. Because I don’t know.

But...

“I think it would be all right to have at least one super-convenient route.”

I hoped it was.

“.....”

Mia didn’t agree or disagree with what I’d said. She just kept looking out the window.

Even if earning a perfect happy ending turned out to be too hard.

Even if somebody had to put up with a little hardship here and there, and the little losses added up.

Even so, they couldn't all be cruel endings where everybody lost everything.

"The future must branch into different routes. Our wills are going to determine which one."

Olivia's will had led me to that clock tower; my actions were pulling Mia into things she didn't expect. Using our wills, our actions, we could change those future routes in all sorts of ways. In which case...

"Don't you think there could be a route where Siesta comes back to life?"

Once again, I hit Mia with the first and greatest reason I'd come to see her.

"—You are the only one allowed to say that," Mia murmured. I didn't know what she meant.

However, reality wasn't kind enough to give me a chance to respond.

"Sorry, but I guess we're going to have to put this chat on hold."

"Huh?"

Just as Mia turned to look, a woman's scream echoed through the bus. When I glanced toward the front—a man in camo was standing there, holding a rifle.

"A busjack, huh?"

My knack for getting dragged into stuff was at the top of its game.

◆ **That leap will cross the world line**

"Th-this is why I didn't want to go outside..."

In the seat next to me, Mia was doing that forest critter thing again. She'd curled up into a little ball and was hugging her knees. Would it be rude to say she was cute? (Or pathetic, even?)

"Well? Didn't see this future coming, did you?"

"How can you gloat at a time like this...?" Mia glared at me resentfully. She'd finally started making eye contact. "My ability isn't nearly as convenient as divination. If I want to make an intentional attempt to see a future that would

dramatically affect the world, I need to set the stage to a certain extent... So I don't know what's going to happen next," she finished in a little voice.

"—Freeze! Don't move a muscle—I can't guarantee what'll happen to ya."

The next moment, a shot rang out as the busjacker fired his rifle at the roof. Then he pointed the muzzle at the passengers, us included... *Geez. Apparently, we can't afford to make any dumb moves.*

"If our comrade is freed, you people will get to leave the bus. We're all in the same boat 'ere. Ha-ha!" The man, who was dressed like a soldier, laughed a whole lot like Bat.

Okay, so he was trying to get his jailed comrade released. Was he planning to negotiate that with the police? This didn't seem like a great approach to take.

"What should we do?" Mia asked quietly.

The mood was extremely tense, but fortunately, from our positions in the very back, we were able to get an accurate picture of the situation. Including Mia and I, there were eleven regular passengers, the driver, and one criminal at the front with a gun. The enemy had a weapon, and there were lots of ordinary citizens around, so we couldn't move carelessly.

"Uh, actually, what do you think we should do?"

"So you're essentially useless when it really counts." Mia dropped her forehead into her hand. "Olivia..." she said, calling her attendant's name. "Cute" and "pathetic" really were two sides of the same coin. "Enough. The world's going to end soon anyway..."

"Look, like I said, don't be such a pessimist." It's possible to be too much of a downer, all right? Not only that, but in her case, she was taking it way too seriously for it to even be funny. "Uh, listen. Even I can act, all right? As long as the detective tells me what to do."

"Please have a little pride, okay?!"

"Mia, is it okay if I hold your hand for a little bit?"

"Were you listening to me?"

I didn't hear a no, so I gripped her small palm. She froze up.

“...I’ve never held a man’s hand before,” Mia muttered very fast, giving an excuse I hadn’t asked for. She sighed. Her hand was even colder than I’d expected it to be. “What would Boss have done at a time like this?”

Maybe she was stretched too thin to keep up appearances; Mia was openly calling Siesta “Boss” now.

“For starters, she’d either drink tea or tease me.”

“That was entirely unhelpful.”

Well, yeah. After all, she was the type who’d take a good, solid nap on a hijacked plane.

“...I may be a Tuner, but I’m not very good with this sort of thing.” Mia looked down, murmuring in a self-deprecating way.

Yeah, it wasn’t as if all the Tuners had great combat skills. It was only the three I’d happened to meet before.

There might be some who only had an intellectual advantage, and others who’d been scouted for their abilities, like Mia. The balance of those twelve kept the world in harmony.

“I don’t have the Assassin’s ironclad sense of mission, or the Vampire’s world-destroying strength, or the Ace Detective’s courage to stare death in the face. That’s why I *wasn’t able to shut down Boss’s bet* back then.”

“Mia, you’re...”

“—Who is that?! Who’s talking?!”

The next instant, the busjacker aimed his rifle at the passengers. Something must have gotten him worked up. He walked up to each passenger, one by one, pointing the rifle at them by turns...but before he got to the very back, he turned around and headed for the driver’s seat again. He hadn’t noticed us.

“As you said, the future does change, sometimes.” Mia spoke in an even softer voice than before. At that volume, the noise of the engine would probably cover it. “Two days ago, I went to Japan. The quality of a future I’d observed only recently had changed, and I wanted to find out why.”

“I see. So that’s why you were on that plane.”

Mia almost never left her tower, and yet she'd been on a flight from Japan to London. I was finally about to learn the reason.

"I knew the future regarding SPES. It should have ended with the sapphire girl's death at the hands of the Assassin and the loss of Seed's vessel. That route had been averted, though. You and your friends were there, at the center of the change."

...Yeah, that's right. We'd chosen to protect Saikawa, meaning Seed had survived. Technically, that choice could easily have made the world our enemy. As a Tuner, and as the Oracle, Mia had a duty to lead the world in the right direction, and she hadn't foreseen that ending.

"The future does change. But where it ends never does."

The bus had stopped for a red light, and Mia looked out the window. Up at the front, the hijacker was yelling at the driver, "Don't stop the bus!"

"The Ace Detective genuinely did change the future. And then, that same day, she died." This was something Mia hadn't told me about yet. *Siesta's bet*, the one she'd started to talk about before. The one she hadn't been able to stop. "Originally, in the sacred text written by the previous Oracle, the battle between SPES and the Ace Detective ended with the latter's defeat."

"You're saying Siesta would have lost to Seed and Hel?"

"Yes. Boss would die, and Seed would make Hel, the survivor, into his vessel. The outcome in the sacred text was the worst one imaginable." Mia told me it had probably been written roughly a decade ago. "But four years ago, Boss met you. Then, little by little, the two of you began to change that future."

...I hadn't done a thing. Back then, Siesta must have been trying to twist destiny itself.

"I felt as though maybe, if this went on, we might avoid Boss's death. About eighteen months ago, I read the future regarding SPES again. And the ending—"

"—Was that Siesta and Hel would take each other out, and Seed would lose his vessel, huh?" As I said it, Mia squeezed my hand tightly.

That was what had actually happened to us last year. Even if the future had

changed slightly, the ultimate endpoint—the bad ending where Siesta died—hadn't changed even with all our efforts.

“Of course I didn't want to give up. I'd destroyed my family with my own two hands. I hadn't been able to save my parents. Even so, I owed Boss for what she did for me, and if nothing else, I wanted to avert the future where she was sacrificed... I think she must already have been prepared for it herself, though.”

...Yeah, that was the kind of person she was. She knew what her fate would be, and even then, she'd stood by her principles as a detective. Even at the cost of her life, she was determined to seal a great evil and save her friend, Natsunagi. She'd make her client's wish come true.

“And unlike me, Boss had been fighting SPES directly. She realized that Seed wanted the sacred text, and at the same time, she'd been preparing for the Phantom Thief's betrayal. She came to me and proposed using those things against them.”

“So she let Seed and the rest steal the sacred text on purpose? When she knew the future it predicted wasn't accurate...?”

That had been Siesta's secret plan. A trap, really. The original ending in the sacred text was that Siesta would be defeated, and Hel, the survivor, would become Seed's vessel. Once she knew that that future would no longer come to pass, she'd intentionally let the sacred text fall into Seed's hands.

Seed had seen that false future and felt reassured. He hadn't picked up on Siesta's bet. That was why his plans had gone off the rails, and why Seed was currently trying to use Yui Saikawa as his vessel, when she'd only been intended as insurance.

“As you say, it is possible to change the future. However, the final outcome doesn't change,” Mia said again, in a voice that held no emotion.

“True, lives have been saved by that changed future. Wishes have been granted. That said, other lives were lost. I...I know this is selfish, but...I would have preferred a future where the person who was precious to me had survived.”

That had to be the regret the Oracle couldn't shake. She hadn't been able to

save the benefactor who'd rescued her from hell. Mia had single-mindedly sought a future where Siesta would survive...but in the end, Siesta's determination as the detective had won out. When it came, the ending had been the same worst-case scenario for Mia.

And so Mia didn't act. She didn't try to change the future. She simply... observed. Just as she'd watched Siesta and Hel's fight unfold from the tallest clock tower in London last year. Mia Whitlock would carry out her duty, writing down the futures she saw, until the day the world met its end. If there was anything I could say to her, it was—

“We're planning to transcend Siesta's will, too.”

Mia's eyes widened.

Was it because of what I'd said, or because I'd gotten to my feet as I said it?

“—Who is that?! Who keeps talking?!”

The busjacker pointed his rifle at me, but the muzzle wavered uncertainly. Of course it did: *The guy couldn't see me.*

“Telling us not to chat during a busjack? You've got that backward.”

Holding Mia's hand, I crouched down low.

“Don't pull a busjack during an important conversation.”

Apparently, we had an extra on this stage. There were ten meters or so between the NPC and me. Assuming my random trouble didn't flare up on the way, this fight would be over in seconds.

“Wait, what are you doing?!”

“Don't worry, he can't see you, either.” That was the power I'd gained when I swallowed Chameleon's seed. It was why I'd been holding Mia's hand this whole time. “I'll bring her back to life, and then I'm gonna tell her ‘Take *that*.’”

Don't think I'll let you manipulate me forever. Maybe you think you died alone and made yourself look all cool, but I'll flip that ending on you. I'll change the future; I'll show you.

“...Are you serious?”

“If I wasn’t, I wouldn’t have come all the way overseas.”

Just then, the busjacker guessed our position from our voices and fired at us. The passengers’ screams filled the bus.

Mia and I dodged the bullet by sliding into some empty seats.

“So please. Help me find a future where Siesta comes back to life.”

“...Do you really think it exists?”

“If it doesn’t, I’ll make it. This time, I’ll be the one *to drag the world in with me.*”

I grabbed Mia’s hand again and set off running. The busjacker was right in front of us now.

“I can’t run...that fast...!”

After years cooped up in her room, Mia tripped over her legs. She was gasping for breath.

...Oh, I see. She hasn’t noticed yet, huh?

“Mia, take a good look at your feet.”

Just as I said that, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a gleaming black handgun. A second busjacker had been pretending to be a passenger. Come to think of it, the military-type guy had said “our” back at the beginning. Sheesh. Maybe I shouldn’t have thought about random trouble causing problems.

“Kimihiro!” Mia screamed my name.

“You handle that one, Mia.”

I dropped her hand and tackled the second busjacker, who’d gotten up from his seat. When the man took a blow to the gut from something he couldn’t see, he gave a sharp shriek and dropped his weapon. —Except I’d let go of Mia, so she was visible now.

“—! Where’d the kid come from?!”

When the girl suddenly materialized right in front of him, the guy in camo looked shocked. However, his confusion gave us a brief opening.

“Mia! Even if you don’t want to change the future, it’s already too late! You know what I’m talking about! *Think about what it means that you’re wearing those shoes right now!*”

The moment I said it, Mia’s lilac eyes went very wide.

Yeah, there you go. Those must have been a present from the Ace Detective. A gift for her high-maintenance junior who wouldn’t leave her tower. At this point, Siesta’s thoughts couldn’t reach her, but they’d taken solid shape and made Mia take a big step forward.

“Dammit, you little—!” The busjacker fired at Mia without bothering to aim.

But it was too late. Those bullets streaked through empty space.

Why, you ask?

If you want to know, look up.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Ah, I guess it’s too late for that, too.

Right then—the toes of the girl who’d jumped high in the air kicked the camo guy’s head for a home run.

Yeah, I’d known about those for four years.

The Ace Detective’s shoes could fly.

◆ Foreshadowing the distant future

“I’m exhausted... I’m never going outside again as long as I live...”

Mia was trudging down the dark street, her shoulders slumped so dramatically you could practically hear the aura of gloom around her.

Thanks to her gravity-defying stunt, we’d managed to subdue the busjackers, and now we were on our way back to the tower. I hoped the uproar over the terrorist incident would be winding down by now.

“Why do all these bizarre things happen when I’m with you?” Mia, who was walking next to me, sent me a reproachful glare.

“Hmm? Was that my fault?”

“...You really are a jerk. I’m being sarcastic, of course.” Mia sighed for the umpteenth time.

“I guess your luck ran out when we just happened to end up on the same plane.”

Come to think of it, that must have been when Mia Whitlock’s trials began.

“...That’s right. I had to spend hours crammed in a meal cart thanks to you.”

Hey, so we’d deduced that part correctly, too? Yeah, that must’ve been rough.

“And why were you two on that flight anyway? I’d intentionally tried to take the flight after yours...”

She must have had Olivia make the arrangements. However, at the last minute, my talent for getting dragged into things had kicked in and changed the future.

“Well, I was saving this cat that was stuck up a tree, and we ended up missing our first flight. That’s all.”

“That’s all?!”

“What do you mean? Cats matter. If you act like they don’t, Siesta will get mad at you.”

There was a time when we got hired to look for this lost cat, and when we found it, the cat was so cute that she kept insisting she wanted one, too.

“So it’s because the Ace Detective conditioned you?”

“...You’re not entirely wrong, but watch your wording.”

That said, the fact that I turned out the way I am was due to this troublesome predisposition of mine. The days I spent before meeting Siesta must have affected me, too.

“But in that case—” Out of nowhere, I felt a soft tug on my jacket sleeve. “It’s your fault this happened to me,” Mia whispered, half a step behind me.

In the moonlight, on a sidewalk illuminated by streetlamps, I turned back. Our eyes met.

“I’ll say it as often as I have to: It was your fault I left my room. It’s your fault that I got pulled into all this awful trouble. And also...it’s your fault that I’ve started wanting, just a little, to change the future. All of it. It’s all your fault. And so...”

Mia Whitlock looked up at me.

“Take responsibility, all right?”

Her expression was troubled, and yet it also seemed somehow hopeful. It was the most human look I’d seen on her face all day. It actually struck me as beautiful.

“Yeah. I’ll take responsibility. Whenever you want, as often as it takes.”

Now we were accomplices.

The guy the gods had abandoned at birth and the girl who kept getting unwanted blessings from them—had just joined forces.

The enemy we were out to take down was— Sure, I’ll be a little melodramatic about it: *the future the gods had ordained*. As opponents went, that was plenty.

For the first time, we smiled at each other, then shook hands.

“Well, there are a few women I’ve promised to marry, so you’ll probably end up waiting a while.”

“...That is completely not what I meant, I’m positive you’re lying, and that is not what I meant. That *really* isn’t what I meant, all right?!”

While we were still busy with that entertaining conversation, we made it back to the clock tower. We rode the dedicated elevator up, and when we opened the door to Mia’s room—

“Oh, Kimizuka. Welcome back.”

Somebody I hadn’t expected was waiting inside.

“Huh. You’ve got another cute girl with you. What, is she one of your potential brides, too?”

“What do you mean ‘too’? What’s that about?” I joked with the detective. She’d glanced at Mia, then pinned me with a cold look. “It looks you got

everything sorted out on your end, Natsunagi.”

Natsunagi was sitting at a table, all by herself, sipping tea. “Yes. Thanks to her.”

A few hours ago, I’d split up with the detective at a graveyard. Apparently, her other partner had helped resolve the Medusa incident.

“Welcome back, Madam Oracle.”

There was another person in the room as well. Olivia bowed to Mia respectfully; she was wearing a classic maid uniform. “Today deviated slightly from your usual routine. How did you like it?”

“Olivia, you dummy.” With a light *thump*, Mia buried her face in Olivia’s chest. That gesture described their relationship eloquently.

“And you, Mr. Kimizuka. I’ve caused you rather a lot of trouble.”

“You sure have.”

Olivia was wearing a salesman’s smile. Taking out my wallet, she handed it to me. When I checked the contents, the master key was in there as well. Geez. In terms of these past few days, it looked as if the Oracle’s attendant had been the brains of the operation, rather than the Oracle herself.

“So now everyone’s here.” Smiling, Olivia poured tea for Mia and me, then motioned for us to sit. “Ignore me, if you would. Please discuss the matter at hand.” She took a step back, then stood there quietly.

The matter at hand would be the reason Natsunagi and I had come to see the Oracle. We were here to have Mia observe a future where Siesta came back to life. At this point, I knew Mia’s ability only worked for phenomena big enough to seriously affect the world, but Siesta was a Tuner, one of the world’s guardians. Her life or death would probably count.

“Let me ask you again.” The Oracle herself was the first to speak. “The two of you truly intend to reclaim the Ace Detective, correct?”

Mia, who’d seated herself at the head of the table, looked straight at Natsunagi and me.

Did we really have that sort of determination?

Did we intend to forge our way through conflict after conflict in order to work a near-blasphemous miracle?

She was asking us about our resolution, in her capacity as a Tuner. In response, I said, “If there really is no such route in the futures you observe, then we’ll give up.”

—Still.

“If there’s even one solitary route on the far side of an infinite stretch of hell, we’ll clear away every obstacle to it with our own hands. That’s our ambition.”

Even as I said it, I thought I sounded way too cool.

But it was all papier-mâché.

I needed to bluff, but I was sure we’d never have a chance. And that was why I issued a declaration to one of the world’s enforcers, as if I were the protagonist of this story or something.

“We won’t just wish. Today, starting now, we’ll take action.” Natsunagi made her own oath to the Oracle with no hesitation, even though she’d never seen her before this evening.

“No matter what it costs you?”

“Yes. Unfortunately, we’ve already come too far to turn back,” I said.

Right. I’d already paid the price when I swallowed the seed that day.

I didn’t plan to tell Natsunagi or anybody else straight-out, but I was prepared to offer anything—one of my five senses, or even my life—to the plant that had made its home inside me. Unless I put that much on the line, I knew this wish of mine would never come true.

I’d conveyed my determination to Mia without putting it into words, and she focused her eyes on me. “Vampires may exist here, but it’s still impossible for humans who’ve died to come back to life just as they were. That means I can’t observe the future of the deceased, and there’s no point in attempting it. However...”

There was a rather ephemeral beauty in her smile.

“Kimihiro Kimizuka—if you really desire to become the world’s singularity, then perhaps...”

◆ A letter from the Ace Detective

“Not fair.”

Walking down Baker Street at night by myself, I sighed.

At the end of our meeting with Mia Whitlock in the clock tower, she’d said, “I have something important to discuss with my fellow Tuner.” As the new candidate for Ace Detective, Natsunagi had stayed, and they’d chased me out.

In the end, Mia hadn’t given us a definite answer about whether or not there was a future where Siesta came back to life. At the very least, though, negotiations hadn’t broken down.

“I’ll have to ask Natsunagi about it when she gets back.”

I was sure that was what they were talking about at this very moment. Forcing myself to be content with that idea, I headed home on my own. I wasn’t bound for the hotel, though.

I was on my way to achieve the trip’s original objective.

“—Wow, that takes me back.”

I’d walked down this street a year ago, too. Only back then, someone else had been there with me.

We’d looked at the clothes in the shop windows. We’d gone shopping for dinner fixings at the supermarket. We’d had tea at her favorite café. Everywhere I looked, I saw traces of her on this street.

As I walked through those familiar sights, an old mixed-use building came into view on a street corner. Siesta and I had used one of its apartments as our office and living quarters. The building had no elevator, so I took the stairs up to the third floor. A little hesitantly, I pushed the key in and turned the doorknob.

“I’m home.”

I knew no one was there.

Even so, out of habit, I told the empty room I was back.

When I opened the curtains, moonlight shone in, illuminating the room. The dining table, the sofa, and all the rest of the furniture was right where we'd left it. Just the way it had been a year ago, when we'd left for SPES's hideout to rescue Natsunagi. When I'd lost Siesta that day, I'd gone straight back to Japan. It was like I was running away.

"This place is really tidy."

I'd thought the room would be dirtier, but there wasn't a speck of dust anywhere. There were no empty pizza boxes, no snack bags scattered around. Our matching teacups had been put away in the dish cupboard, where they belonged. Siesta must have cleaned it thoroughly last year before we left. She'd known we wouldn't be coming back.

I headed for the bedroom. That had been Siesta's room, and there was a bed and a small study in there. The desk had a little locked drawer.

"That's right. This is it."

I remembered the conversation I'd had with Siesta about that drawer, a bit over a year ago.

I'd gone into her study on an errand, and I had seen her sneaking something into that drawer. Then, she'd promptly locked it and tried to make me deduce what was inside—

"If you want to know what's in here so badly, why don't you try making a deduction for once? If you can, that is."

"If you'd go that far to avoid telling me, then it's gotta be you-know-what. I heard rumors your three great drives are stronger than other people's, Siesta, so it's a fairly hard-core porn magazine..."

"Are you stupid, Kimi?"

"Man, that's not fair."

"I'm not you, all right?"

"Ouch. You didn't have to hit back that hard."

“This isn’t like the hidden folders on your computer, okay?”

“Hey, how much do you know?!”

“You really shouldn’t rename your folders with the titles of complicated-sounding English dissertations. It’s really shortsighted.”

“Yeah, let’s not talk about this. I’d really prefer we stopped talking about this right now.”

“It might work with other people, but it won’t work on me. I just thought it looked interesting, and I peeked inside.”

“So I should have named it something that wouldn’t grab your interest...? Like ‘100 of the Latest Hot Instagram Spots’ or something?”

“What I am trying to say is...”

“?”

“...Don’t spring those vivid images on me like that.”

Siesta had murmured the words very fast. Unusually for her, she’d blushed and looked away.

“...Okay, that’s not even relevant. I need to stop reminiscing.”

Mentally changing gears, I took out the master key I’d inherited from Siesta and turned on the orange fluorescent light. The key was one of Siesta’s Seven Tools; I’d heard it would open any lock easily. She’d used it to get into my apartment, back when we’d first met.

“Don’t let me down, Siesta,” I prayed, then stuck the key into the lock. There was a good possibility that she’d left a hint regarding the fight with SPES here, as her legacy. However, the past Siesta probably hadn’t known everything about SPES, either.

Even Mia’s clairvoyance, which Siesta had counted on, wasn’t perfect. Mia had said as much herself. That was why Siesta had taken that risk. In order to keep me from realizing how it would end, she must have avoided telling me anything important during those three years. Now that I’d finished the homework she’d given me, though, I was sure she’d cooperate. On that thought, I turned the key, opened the drawer, and—

“A letter?”

The drawer held a single letter.

The envelope was sealed with sealing wax. I opened it with a letter opener, then took out the stationery.

It was a letter to me, and it began with “To my assistant.”

“Are you stupid, Kimi?”

“...Not fair.”

For some unfathomable reason, she’d yelled at me in the very first line. What had I done, huh? Pulling myself together, I let my eyes go to the second line.

“Trying to uncover a girl’s secrets? That’s a huge turnoff, frankly. Even now, as you’re reading this—what sort of methods did you use? Just imagining it is scary.”

“What’s wrong with you? I was legit about this.”

Because you used that maid to give me the key, all right?

“That said, I think the fact that you found this means you wanted to get your hands on ‘that information,’ even if it meant going this far.”

There we go, this is it. Yes, you called it. I want to know the information on SPES that you left behind, and how to defeat Seed.

Getting my hopes up, I read the next line.

“Of the two, I prefer strawberry shortcake to Mont Blanc.”

“I completely could not care less!”

I came really close to flinging the letter across the room. Seriously, what was wrong with her? There was no way I’d come to London just to learn a thing like that after all this time... *And I seem to recall, Siesta, when you made me go buy those two desserts, you ate both of them. Mine included.*

“Jokes aside...”

“I didn’t come here to do a comedy routine across space-time with you, either, all right?”

“...I’ll set down my observations on SPES and its leader Seed here.”

Finally, she got to the main topic.

The letter continued on the second sheet of stationery.

“When you’re reading this letter, I presume you’ll have a certain amount of knowledge regarding SPES. Therefore, I’ll omit the details about that. My hand would get tired otherwise.”

...Setting aside that grade schooler-level excuse, Siesta’s presumption was correct. Now that I’d recovered my memories of meeting Seed and had learned about the Tuners, I’d be able to follow her story to a certain extent.

“First, the premise: Seed is the progenitor of all of SPES. I believe that if we defeat him, the production of pseudohuman clones will cease, which will propel SPES toward destruction. Therefore, our goal must be to defeat Seed.”

Good, that matched up with what we were trying to do.

That’s why we’d come here looking for information about Seed.

“However, at present, Seed doesn’t seem inclined to show himself. We can conjecture that he doesn’t want to make any eye-catching moves, and that he doesn’t desire war. His wish is simply to satisfy his survival instinct, and only his subordinates are committing acts of terror.”

When I compared that supposition against what I’d learned so far, it made plenty of sense. Seed hadn’t personally taken action. Instead, he’d made Hel and the other executives do all the conspicuous stuff—and it had all been designed to get Siesta, his candidate vessel, onto the battlefield.

He’d cultivated Siesta through battle...or maybe he’d boosted the survival instinct of the seed that was sprouting inside her by making her compete with Hel. That had been what would synchronize her with him, the primordial seed.

“Since Seed can’t adapt to Earth’s environment, he’s seeking a human vessel. Hel and I are at the top of his list... But what prevents him from adapting to Earth, specifically? If we can determine that, it could prove to be his Achilles’ heel.”

...I see. Yes, that was true. Exactly what about this planet was so hard on

Seed? That would be the key to taking him down.

“It could be water, for example, or some element of the air, nitrogen or oxygen. Can we assume that his weakness is something Earth has in abundance, but which didn’t exist on his home planet or in outer space?”

Siesta’s observations continued on a third sheet of stationery.

“The Vampire seemed to have some sort of hint, but when we negotiated, I wasn’t able to pay the price he requested, so I was ultimately unable to get it out of him. You be careful of that man, too.”

So Scarlet really had been involved. What would that narcissistic vampire have asked for? He’d better not have told Siesta to offer herself. If he did, next time I see him, I’ll slaughter him in his sleep.

“One more important thing: I said that Seed tended not to show himself, but I did fight him once. It was four years ago, on that island.”

Four years ago. But this letter had been written a year ago, which would make it five years before now. Siesta had been at the SPES facility six years ago. Had she attempted another attack on Seed, one year later?

“However, you couldn’t really call that a fight. Seed’s strength was overwhelming. In terms of raw strength in a fight, he’s probably equal to the Vampire or the Assassin; he may even surpass them. I was utterly defeated, and I fled from that place.”

Seed was at least as strong as a Tuner. Back then, Siesta had still been a kid; she could never have been a match for an opponent like that. Seed had probably only let her escape because she was a candidate vessel. He’d been counting on her growth.

“A little while after that, I met a girl named Mia Whitlock who could see the future. Mia became a Tuner, and she looked up to me as one with more experience. She worried about me, and one day, she made an exception and showed me what was written about SPES in the sacred text.”

And what had Siesta seen there...? It must have been what Mia had told me about on the bus. At first, the sacred text had told of a future in which Siesta was defeated by SPES, and Hel became Seed’s vessel.

“That experience showed me that overturning the future and defeating Seed would require extremely careful planning. I knew I would need more information about SPES. That’s why I spoke to you that day, up in the air.”

That had been four years ago—far overhead, at ten thousand meters.

Siesta, who’d made me carry her gun onto the plane, had intended to make me her assistant all along.

I was sure there was just one reason: *this predisposition* of mine.

With me around, incidents—and SPES—would come to her.

“Then I got a little careless and took a nap, so I wasn’t able to explain the plan properly.”

Look... Do you have any idea how freaked out I was back then? First, I got pulled into a hijacking out of nowhere, and then I ended up in a fight with a pseudohuman.

“But you managed to follow me just fine. You did even better than I thought you would, actually. More than anything...”

I turned to the fourth sheet.

“...talking to you was fun.”

“Are you a moron?” I caught myself retorting out loud.

“The next thing I knew, I’d ended up dragging you all over the place with me for three whole years. I’m sorry.”

I’d heard that apology before, when Siesta temporarily took control of Natsunagi’s body.

...Sheesh. I’d told her not to say she was sorry.

“It’s likely that I’m still causing problems for you. If you need this letter, it means that I’ve failed to kill Seed. I think I’m causing a great deal of trouble for you, and probably for your current companions as well. As the Ace Detective, and as a Tuner, the fact that I wasn’t able to ensure that justice was served is more shameful than anything. At the same time, I want to apologize from the bottom of my heart to you who were left behind.”

The letter was four pages in all.

This was how she ended it.

“Finally, while I’d like to outline specifically what you should do next, even I can’t accurately predict the future a year from now. In particular, due to that predisposition of yours, the environment that surrounds you changes by the day. It’s very likely to be doing something even the Oracle can’t predict. That being the case, as I close this letter, I’ll place the faintest of expectations on you. I look forward to seeing you choose a future that would never occur to me.”

That was the end of the letter. It was just like Siesta to finish that way. By saying she couldn’t begin to predict what I’d do, she left things up in the air, and yet she did seem to have realized that whatever future we chose would be pretty wild.

“Too bad, though. Of all the unexpected futures, the route where you come back to life must be the one you expect least.”

With a little laugh, I dropped onto Siesta’s bed, then lay there on my back. Come to think of it, I’d spent the night with her one time, when she’d gotten drunk. And after that, we’d had that huge fight... Geez.

“Hurry and wake up, Siesta.”

Then let’s fight again, and feel all awkward, and one of us will give an embarrassed apology, and we’ll eat pizza and cake, and drink tea, and have really dumb conversations. As I thought about that... I felt as if, right now, I might be able to dream about it.

There on the bed, I softly closed my eyes.

◆ On a moonlit night, you vow

Something smelled sweet.

It was a fragrance like rose perfume, something comforting and reassuring.

“Oh, you’re awake.”

When I woke from a world of darkness, I saw a girl’s face right next to me.

“...What are you doing, Natsunagi?”

I'd only meant to close my eyes for a minute, but apparently, I'd conked out.

"Watching you. You were snoozing as peacefully as a baby."

"Don't just get into a bed where a guy's sleeping."

"Did it make your heart skip a beat?"

"Well, being in Siesta's bed with you is making me sweat, but not for the reasons you might be thinking."

Siesta would probably belt me one without saying a word. In a dream, for example.

"And? Why are you here, Natsunagi?" Had she and Mia finished their talk? "Actually, how did you get here? Did you take a taxi? It's not safe to walk around by yourself too late at night."

"...Huh! So you're worried about me."

The room was gloomy, but I could tell she was smiling at me. *Fine, I get it, just quit smirking.*

"Well? Did you find what you were looking for?" she prompted.

"Yeah, Siesta left us a letter with a hint. Starting tomorrow, it looks like we'll be adjusting the plan a little."

That said, our plan still wasn't clear. To be honest, I wanted to get Natsunagi's input, too. However, right now... "How did things go on your end?"

I propped myself up on one elbow. She was lying next to me. While I'd been here, reading the letter, Natsunagi had been discussing the possibility of bringing Siesta back to life with the Oracle.

"Mm-hmm. It's all right."

Natsunagi nodded. Her expression was sincere. "The Oracle said that that future, or the possibility of it, definitely exists."

"—Seriously?! ...Then why did she make me leave by myself back there?" Deep down, I'd been worried that no such route existed, and she'd told me to go because she hadn't had the heart to tell me that.

"Oh, that was, um... She said she had to dress formally and make preparations

in order to see the future. I bet she was embarrassed about the idea of you seeing her change.”

What’s with that girly reason...? Well, it didn’t matter, as long as it wasn’t the worst-case scenario I’d been imagining.

“That said, it sounds like she still needs some time to think about specifically what needs to be done in order to make that future happen.”

“I see... Still, just learning it’s possible is an achievement all by itself.”

I’d never thought this wish would come true in a day or two. We’d probably have to sit down with Mia and talk things over thoroughly. All that aside... “There’s a way to reclaim Siesta, then? Really...?”

In that dawn, I’d screamed it.

I’d sworn at the top of my lungs that I’d bring the detective back to life.

Part of it must have been delirium. I hadn’t had one single idea about concrete ways to bring that blasphemous miracle about.

...But there really was a way to reclaim Siesta? Would I get to see her again someday?

“Say, Kimizuka.” Natsunagi spoke lightly. “Do you want to bring Siesta back to life?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Then you really did like her?”

“I don’t get the connection between those statements.” *What’s that “then” about, huh? Geez...* “She wasn’t my lover, and we weren’t even friends. She was just a business partner.”

“I see. So your love was unrequited.”

“Hey, don’t make things up.”

“Oh, it’s fine. Treat this like the night of a school trip. Wanna talk romance? C’mon!”

“Why are you so hyper, huh? Knock it off. And I don’t think guys and girls talk about this stuff togeth— Okay, I get it. I get it! Quit poking me all over the

place!" *She's weirdly persistent today. Actually...* "Natsunagi, wait... Are you drunk?" I'd thought that scent earlier was perfume, but could it have been liquor? Sure, the legal drinking age in England was eighteen, but...

"Who knows? All girls have secrets."

Oh, is that right? Well, she could be hyper if she wanted, but would she do something she might regret later? Would she be tearing her hair out over this tomorrow? (I sure had back then.)

"And? And? Be honest. What did you really think of Siesta, Kimizuka? C'mon, c'mon, I'm the only one who's listening."

Still, Natsunagi kept getting in my face.

Apparently, she wasn't going to let me go that easily... *Man, I guess I've got no choice.* "I said she was just a business partner. Let me correct that." I turned my face away from Natsunagi, looking up at the ceiling.

"What was she *really*...?"

"...A business partner who was just a little bit special."

"Yowza!"

"You *are* making fun of me, aren't you!"

I flipped over and unleashed a ferocious attack on Natsunagi's forehead.

"Owww! Kimizuka, your forehead flicks seriously hurt, all right?!" she yelled. I could hear the beginnings of tears in her voice.

How's that? Did it sober you up a bit? "What, I thought you liked pain!"

"I hate pain with no love behind it!"

"Ever the proper masochist..."

I'm begging you, in the future, don't get stuck with a violent dude or some good-for-nothing guy you need to bankroll.

"...Haaah. Well, as long as I managed to get those words out of you, I guess it's okay." Natsunagi seemed to have calmed down a little after all. Murmuring to herself, she sat up.

“Natsunagi?”

Sitting on the bed, she gazed at me steadily.

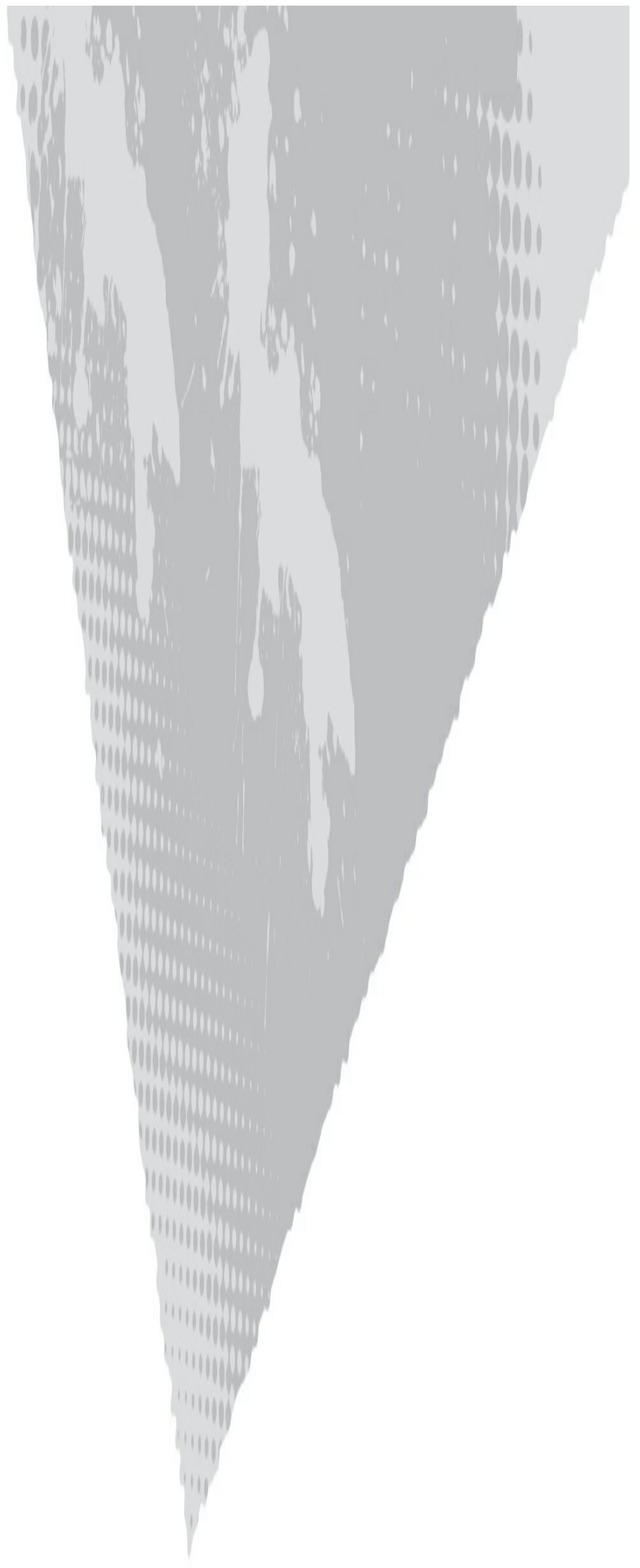
“Just leave it to me,” she said firmly, there in the moonlight.

“I’ll get Siesta back, no matter what I have to do. I swear on the name of the proxy detective.”

Natsunagi smiled at me.

Those words seemed so reliable that I thought I wouldn’t mind leaving my entire destiny in her hands.

Her smile was so beautiful that I wanted to stay right there, watching it, until the end of the world.



A certain girl's recollections

How many months had it been since the fire?

“—Where was this place again?” I murmured to myself.

The room around me was completely white and empty.

My parents had died, and the religious group they'd formed around me had broken up. After that, since I had no relatives, some organization that claimed to take in orphans had brought me to this facility. Did the significant echo to my voice mean that *this was another* basement room?

“I wonder if they're going to kill me.”

I had the vague idea that they might. For example, maybe they said nice-sounding things about taking care of orphans, but they were actually monitoring me because of my special abilities, and they planned to get rid of me once they'd observed me enough. Either that, or this place might belong to a different religious group, or I might have been kidnapped and locked up by a criminal syndicate.

At this point, though, that didn't matter. My power hadn't been able to save the people who were close to me. On the contrary, many people's lives had been ruined because of me. In that case, it was only natural that I be punished.

If I'd had a solid sense of mission...if I'd had strength, or courage... Would it have changed the outcome? If so, I was sure God had given this ability to the wrong person.

“—Intruder! She went that way!”

Suddenly, in the distance, I heard an anxious shout. Was it one of the adults who'd brought me here?

“Sorry, but I can't leave her to you people.”

Then footsteps and another voice, a girl's voice, came closer to my room. I heard gunshots. Apparently, the girl was the intruder. Could this girl be a grim

reaper who'd come to take my life? ...I hoped she was, really. After all...

"There's nothing I can do anymore."

All my ability did was steal others' futures, their potential. It just broke them.

In that case—

"In that case, want to try using that ability to protect the world instead?"

Just then, a clear voice suggested the exact opposite of what I'd had in mind. Then she destroyed the wall of that white room with a single gunshot, stepped in, and held out a hand to me.

"Mia Whitlock—I want you to come fight the enemies of the world with me."

That was how I met Boss.

* * *

"Nobody told me I'd be this busy..."

Finally finished with my *duties* for the day, I slumped on the room's sofa.

By then, that other day felt like the distant past. On that day, the Ace Detective had taken me from the mysterious facility where I'd been kept under house arrest. Now I was living in a room in the tallest clock tower in England.

"How many more books do I have to write anyway?"

I'd been moving my right hand practically involuntarily for hours and hours. It felt hot, and it throbbed with a pain like tendinitis.

Here, my job was to use my ability to prophesy global crises, then write them all down in books known as "sacred texts." From what I'd been told, generations of people who held the post of "Oracle" had been doing this job since antiquity. Now it was my job, and I was carrying out my duties, although I wasn't used to them yet.

"*You sound pretty tired.*"

I wasn't sure if that was meant to be gratitude or a dig at me as it came from the cell phone I'd tossed aside. It was a scheduled contact from the individual who'd set me up with this job.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I’m incredibly tired. Thanks to you, Boss.”

“My, my. Such sarcasm toward your seniors,” my caller said, teasing. She’d only been a Tuner six months longer than I had, but she’d told me she was my mentor, and she’d looked so proud of it that I’d given in and called her that.

“Once again, how is everything? Have you gotten used to your new life?”

“...Yes, finally, after close to half a year,” I told her, heading out onto the balcony with my phone.

“Are you dissatisfied? I thought you might be.”

“Did I sound like I was?”

Well, this job was rougher than I’d expected it to be. Sometimes, I got so tired I wanted to pitch the whole thing...

“Still, it’s a great help to me that you accepted the position,” Boss said with surprising candor. *“Remember that global crisis involving SPES that you made an exception and told me about? I can infer the links between the fragmented facts in the sacred text and keep the damage to a minimum. That means you’re definitely carrying out your duty of protecting the world.”* Her voice was kind. Even though according to the sacred text, the fate she bore was harsher than anyone’s.

“...I see.” Boss’s straightforward words made me feel awkward and shy...but even so. “Yes. I think this life is a hundred thousand times better than my old one, too.”

I didn’t have to be stubborn with someone who was several thousand miles away.

“This job will make the best use of my ability. I’ll be able to use it to benefit people. Someday, I might even be able to save the world. And so...” I drew a deep breath, gazing out over the panoramic view from a hundred meters up. The city seemed to be dissolving in the evening light. It was a sight I never could have seen when I’d been shut up in those underground rooms, and I tried to take it in now so I’d never forget. “Thank you for giving me this view,” I told the screen.

I was a little embarrassed, but it was the sort of thing I'd be able to say now, when I couldn't see her face.

"That smile is completely against the rules, so be responsible showing it to boys, all right?"

"...H-how do I shut this camera off?"

* * *

I'd thought those busy, fulfilling, peaceful days would go on forever.

One day, though, after my life as the Oracle had continued for another two and a half years...

"As I've told you over and over, I'm against this." I was talking to the usual person, and there was just a little anger in my voice. "I was all right with deliberately letting the enemy steal the sacred text. But so what if it is a chance to trick Seed? Do you intend to sacrifice yourself, Siesta?"

It was a trap Boss had suggested one day, a way to suppress an enemy of the world known as Seed. Lately, she'd been doggedly trying to persuade me to help with that plan. Although, the future had been taking a turn for the better, ever since she'd met him...

"I'm not basing the whole thing on self-sacrifice. That part is just insurance. Call it a last resort." Boss gave a light smile, deflecting my sharp questions.

"...Then you really don't intend to die?"

"I'm a detective. I'm merely assuming various possibilities and acting on them, in preparation for the future you see, Mia." She admonished me, but her tone was mild.

"But did you tell him about this maneuver?"

"Who's 'him'?"

...Was I seriously hearing that from the Ace Detective?

"Come on, you're always talking about him. The boy you said you're traveling with."

"Oh, my assistant? I don't think I talk about him all that much."

“Yes, you do, every time you call. What you and your assistant talked about today, and where you went, and what you ate together, and what games you played. You go on and on about all sorts of things when I haven’t even asked.”

Every time, I’d wondered exactly what sort of report she was giving me, and here she hadn’t even been aware of it?

“...*Is that right?*” Abruptly, Boss’s voice went quiet. I thought it was kinda cute; does that mean I lose? “*Well, regardless, my assistant has nothing to do with this.*” Boss had cleared her throat a little, but she’d still decided not to tell the boy about the maneuver.

“If it has nothing to do with him, why won’t you tell him?”

“.....”

She wouldn’t answer that one. Even if she didn’t say, though, I could guess. If she was honest with him, she knew he’d try to stop her. Boss knew better than anyone that no one else would accept her resolution.

“*But I am the Ace Detective, so...*”

She wouldn’t yield that point. She couldn’t. As long as she was a Tuner, with DNA that helped her fight the enemies of the world, it didn’t matter how hard I tried to persuade her. I was sure she’d never change her mind. And really—I’d known that since the first time she had made this suggestion to me.

“Promise me, then,” I told her. “Promise you’ll fight all the way to the end. That you won’t give up.”

My voice might have been trembling. This should go without saying, but I didn’t want Boss to die. Still...I just couldn’t treat her resolution as a Tuner with disdain. And so at the very least, even if she did put that plan into action, I didn’t want her to give up on living. It was a selfish wish, but I left it in her hands.

“—Yes, *I promise.*” Boss nodded, lightly but firmly. “*Didn’t you know? You wouldn’t think it, but I like perfectly happy endings.*”

With a cheerful smile, she told me to keep that in mind.

“Liar.”

Six months after that, I flopped down onto the sofa face-first and snapped at my now-deceased benefactor.

“I thought you liked happy endings.”

I would never get another scheduled phone call from her, I knew—and yet my phone was in my hand.

“Madam Mia, it’s time.”

I heard a knock; my attendant Olivia was calling me.

“...I know. I was just checking the time.”

Yes, even if someone close to me died or the world was ending tomorrow, I had to perform my duties. *I’m sure the girl who gave me this job would have wanted me to.* I silently answered my own question as Olivia helped me change into my costume.

I only saw the future as it was, then silently wrote it down in the sacred text. That was the one routine permitted to me, and the duty I must carry out.

“I’ll be back.”

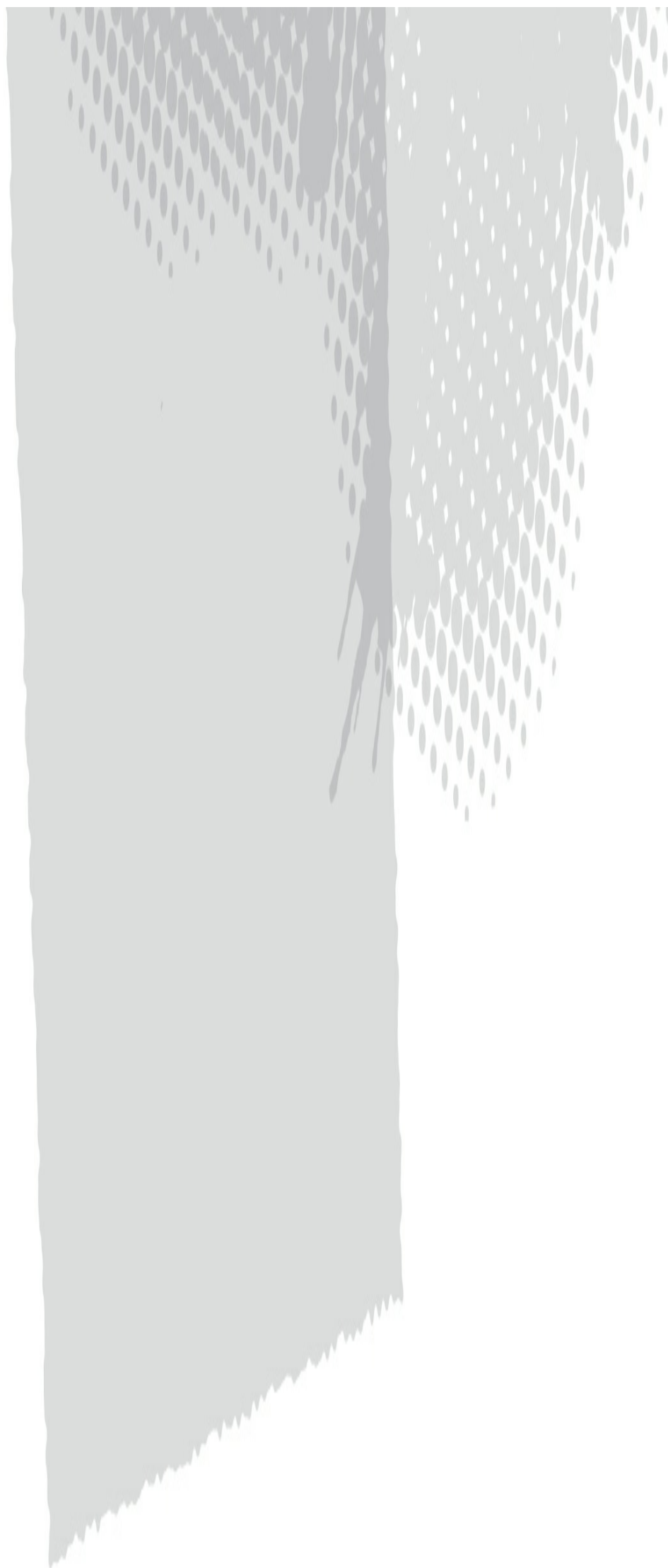
After I’d changed, I made my way to the tower’s balustrade in order to complete my task.

Bathed in the light of the setting sun, I closed my eyes and cleared my mind of distractions—future possibilities that couldn’t really exist.

It was true that I’d failed. I hadn’t been able to save my precious benefactor. I hadn’t managed to change the future. But if there was just one person in the world who was allowed to commit a taboo like that, it was—

“The Singularity.”

He dragged the entire world into things. Would he be able to change what lay beyond the future?



Chapter 4

◆ A journey to take back what we forgot

Having gotten results of a sort, Natsunagi and I had left London and were on our way to our next destination, hoping to find a way to subjugate SPES.

“Ngh, I feel sick...,” Natsunagi muttered, clapping a hand over her mouth.

However, she definitely (probably) wasn’t running me down. She was seasick.

Out on the rolling waves, Natsunagi clung desperately to the gunwale of a small boat, already groggy.

I rubbed her back for her. “Are you okay? Do you need to throw up? I’ll pretend I didn’t see it, so don’t worry about that.”

“Throwing up here might ruin my appeal as a heroine, so I’ll hold it...”

“You’re hilarious.”

I’d been on a boat with Natsunagi before, but it had been a big cruise ship, so she’d been fine that time.

“I can see the island already. It’ll be over soon.”

That’s right: We were currently bound for the island SPES had used as its secret hideout, way back then. We were headed there just to learn more about our enemy Seed. A year ago, that completely unforeseen encounter with him had kept us from investigating properly. This time, we might find something useful.

On that thought, we’d decided to leave England and make for this island, and so here we were. A certain someone had been kind enough to bring us all the way out here.

“We should arrive in another fifteen minutes. Detective and Assistant, get ready, please.” Olivia, the Oracle’s servant, emerged from the pilothouse. She

hadn't just arranged a flight from London for us; she'd piloted the boat all this way.

"I had no idea you could sail."

"Yes. If I apply myself, I can fly a fighter jet as well."

At that level, I get the feeling she should switch careers from cabin attendant to pilot.

"Still, I really can't thank you enough for doing this for us," Natsunagi said, even though her face was still pale.

"It's all right. Serving my mistress has accustomed me to fielding self-indulgent requests." Smiling quietly, Olivia started back to the pilothouse. However, she soon came to a halt, and she spoke to us without turning around.

"Besides, I believe you two will create the future Madam Mia hopes for."

A little while after that, we said a temporary good-bye to Olivia and stepped onto the island.

I hadn't seen this in a year: a small, remote, desolate island that seemed completely uninhabited. But we headed inland in search of the research facility we knew was there.

"Walking is tough..." Last year, I'd made this trip on the back of a motorcycle Charlie had ridden like a pro. "What do you say, Natsunagi? Don't you think it's about time you got your driver's license?"

"Uh, don't rely on me for that. It's really more your job, Kimizuka." Natsunagi eyed me with disdain, now that her seasickness had worn off. "Hmm... A guy who's not interested in cars... I see no future here..."

"Why are you thinking about a future with me, Natsunagi?" Personally, I'd like to spend my future in the passenger seat of a capable woman's car. Since I am the assistant and all.

"Actually, it's pretty late to bring this up, but," Natsunagi went on, changing the subject beside me, "do you think there's any new information about SPES left on this island? I mean, it just seems as if Charlie or somebody like that would already have checked."

She had a point... Really, I didn't even have to ask Charlie to know she'd probably made a trip out here. In fact, while I'd spent the past year doing nothing, she'd been hunting for Siesta's legacy and gearing up to subjugate SPES.

"Charlie's not suited to brainwork, though."

"If she were here right now, she would end you for that."

...Well, those were the roles Charlie and I had always played.

"Besides, I thought there might be something only we could pick up on."

I'd lost Siesta on this island a year ago. I had history here. Meanwhile, Natsunagi had spent her childhood at the SPES testing facility. Considering we both had missing memories, we might pick up on some new fact.

"I...see." Natsunagi put a fingertip to her chin, thinking. "In that case, before we go to the research facility, there's somewhere I'd like to stop first."

She named a certain spot she hadn't visited in a long time.

◆ The first trio

"Is this the place you told us about earlier?"

"Yes. It hasn't changed in six years... Although the ceiling feels a little lower, I think," Natsunagi said, exploring the room.

We were in the little cardboard secret base she'd known so well six years ago.

"This is where the three of us put together our battle plan for defeating the pseudohumans," she said, picking up one of the stuffed animals that sat by the window.

The "three" she meant had been Natsunagi, Siesta, and Alicia. She'd said so herself, during the conversation she'd had in the mirror with Hel the other day. The rebellion against SPES had begun here, with those three.

"Ali had always been suspicious about this facility, and she checked into various things on her own." Natsunagi took a thick file folder off a shelf. The forms inside it were filled with what looked like personal information for the children who'd been raised at this facility. As Natsunagi flipped through them, I

glimpsed a photo of a young girl with beautiful blond hair. Had a little kid like her been put through Seed's vessel experiments, too?

"Six years ago, though, Ali—Alicia—died. Then Siesta died last year. I'm the only one left." Natsunagi bit her lip.

She had a past she'd forgotten, a mission she hadn't been able to carry out. I'd steeled myself the same way she had, but I couldn't easily guess the pressure resting on Nagisa Natsunagi's small shoulders.

"I'm sorry for taking up time like this."

Natsunagi put the folder back on the shelf, then gave her cheeks a sharp smack, pulling herself together. Renewing her resolution was probably part of the reason she'd wanted to come here, to a place filled with memories of Alicia and Siesta.

"No problem." I opened the closest cardboard box.

I'd vaguely guessed I might find a clue in there, but all I found were a few of the small guns Alicia had made.

"Come to think of it, Alicia made the basic model for Siesta's musket, didn't she?"

"Yes, Ali really could make anything. It was like magic." Natsunagi smiled, remembering.

She'd been such a noble, courageous girl that just hearing about her made me wish I could have met her myself.

"Oh, there's a bomb here. Want to take it along?"

"...Did your friend have proper certification for handling dangerous substances?"

◆ **Cross my heart and hope to die**

Shortly after that, we reached SPES's test facility. Since this had been their base of operations, I thought information about Seed might still be here, but...

"Want to walk around a bit?"

Natsunagi and I explored the building, which looked a bit like a hospital. Not much sunlight made it inside. The rooms were gloomy, and the place felt deserted. Once I started to think we were wasting time just wandering around aimlessly like this, I was about to head for that other location, when...

“Natsunagi?”

...I realized she was pinching my sleeve between her fingertips.

“...I’m sorry.” There was a shadow in her eyes, and a barely perceptible tremble in her hands.

...Oh, right. What sort of place had this research facility been to her? How had they made her feel here? It was no wonder Natsunagi was like this.

“It’s okay,” I told her. “There are no enemies here to hurt you now.”

A year ago, SPES had already almost abandoned this place. Then, as Natsunagi herself had said, Charlie must have come here to investigate. We didn’t need to be that wary anymore; it wasn’t that dangerous.

“...Yes, I know. Logically, I understand that.”

But Natsunagi couldn’t get her feet to move.

She knew this place was safe as well as I did. However, the pain and fear she’d experienced here long ago had left an indelible mark on her. That was why Natsunagi had unconsciously created Hel: to carry that pain and those memories for her.

—In that case...

“Here.” I turned my back to Natsunagi, then put my hands behind me.

“Um... Piggyback?” Natsunagi sounded bewildered.

Yeesh. Having her spell it out like that was embarrassing. “Well, you know. I can’t give you a ride on the back of a motorcycle, but you can ride me.” I prompted Natsunagi to climb onto my back.

“...Pfft!”

“Hey, stop. Why are you cracking up?”

Had she noticed my failed attempt to look cool? *Well, I wish you hadn’t. And*

even if you do notice, don't laugh at people's failures.

"Heh-heh, no... I just thought that line couldn't have sounded more like you. Not that that's a compliment."

"What, it's not?! Why not?!" Never mind that, hurry and get on. Just standing here like this is embarrassing.

"If you say I'm heavy or something, I'll double-kill you."

"I do have that much tact."

"Then okay, I guess... Thanks," Natsunagi murmured in a little voice.

Then she jumped onto my back.

"Huh. You're in better shape than I expected."

The whisper had come from right behind my ear.

"—Hel, huh?"

The voice was pitched a little lower than Natsunagi's, and then there was the way she phrased herself. I apparently had Natsunagi's second personality on my back now.

"Why are you here? You can just come out on your own like that?"

"This is a special case. As you know, this place is a little *difficult* for my master."

Had Hel emerged because she'd picked up on Natsunagi's fear? Just as she'd always taken on her pain and suffering for her?

"I thought I'd gotten her calmed down pretty nicely."

"No, have some common sense. Piggybacks won't work. Really lame. My master is kind, so she went along with you so she wouldn't hurt your feelings, that's all."

She'd just dropped a complete bomb. She had to be kidding. Was Natsunagi always looking out for my feelings like that? I'd thought we'd been having fun conversations; had it all just been in my head? Girls' mental ages might be higher than they looked...with the exception of Charlotte Arisaka Anderson...

“No, wait. In that case, why are you still on my back, Hel?” I thought piggybacks were lame.

“Oh, I just didn’t want to go to the trouble of getting down. Besides...” Hel gave a wry smile. “I thought it might be all right to act as your partner, just this once.”

Come to think of it, I remembered she’d tried to get me to be her partner at one point...although I couldn’t imagine the words in the sacred text had been written with this situation in mind.

“And you helped Natsunagi out yesterday, too, didn’t you?”

She’d told me that Hel was the real reason the Medusa incident had been resolved. Over my shoulder, I thanked her for giving my partner a hand.

“I swear. You have two Ace Detectives, and yet you lean on me.” Right by my ear, Hel gave a faint, resigned chuckle. “I don’t have a powerful sense of justice or strong passions that aren’t swayed by circumstance, the way those two did. However, there are apparently places where devils can prove valuable by being themselves.”

Her self-deprecation wasn’t genuine self-loathing. Hel had once called herself a monster, but she’d been saved through her conversation in the mirror with Natsunagi. Natsunagi had told her that she certainly wasn’t a monster or devil—she had always been particular about love. That being yanked around by trivial emotions proved that she was human.

“Well, I don’t think it’s the sort of move we could use again and again. In any case, my master is quite strong now, even without me there,” Hel told me.

“If you can surface in Natsunagi’s body, then what about Siesta? Could she come out anytime she wanted to?” I asked as I walked along, piggybacking Hel.

“That Ace Detective and I have different *origins*, so it’s hard to say for certain,” Hel hedged. “Even so, I can’t see her taking control of this body again. She probably decided it was all right to loosen my *bindings* to a certain extent, and the relief sent her into a deeper sleep. Besides...” She drew a small breath, right next to my ear.

“Hel?”

“...Oh, it’s nothing. I just thought that the Ace Detective really is the only thing you think about, in any situation,” Hel whispered, making fun of me. Geez, that’s extremely unfair.

“What, are you jealous?”

“I’ll drop you into hell.”

“Why are you harsher than the detectives...?” Her threats made “stupid” and “double-kill” seem cute.

“Since you’re a human who’s been kind enough to get close to my master, I’m simply trying to secure you as her partner. I personally have no interest in you.”

“I’m calling BS. You fought over me with Siesta.”

“Why are you the princess?” Hel exhaled, sounding rather appalled. She’s able to show all kinds of different emotions now, huh. “As a matter of fact, I’m intensely irritated with you right now.” This time, her voice was cold. “You’re free to love that Ace Detective, but—”

“I don’t love her.”

“—*But*,” Hel repeated firmly, cutting me off.

“If you make my master cry, there will be consequences.”

Those were Hel’s unwavering feelings toward Natsunagi. Even if it meant getting her own hands dirty, she’d try to protect her master’s life. To her, it was an absolutely changeless vow.

“Yeah, I know.” I nodded without hesitating.

I did it for Nagisa Natsunagi’s sake, of course.

Either that, or for Hel, who might have become my real partner on one of those countless potential routes.

“That’s a promise, then,” Hel said. She put her lips right up next to my ear.

“If you lie—I’ll double-kill you.”

In a voice that numbed my brain, she made a promise for two people with me.

“...Huh...? I...”

The next moment, the voice I was used to came back.

“Are you okay, Natsunagi? We’re almost there,” I said over my shoulder.

“Ah... Oh, yes... I see.”

She must have realized why her memories of the past minute or so were missing—but her sigh carried a hint of relief.

“Oh, sorry. You’ve been carrying me this whole time.”

“Don’t worry about it. Your boobs are touching me more than I figured they would, though.”

“Didn’t you say you had tact?!”

Forging ahead with Natsunagi still on my back—while she hollered at me to put her down—I stepped into the elevator that went underground.

“Does this thing still work?”

“I dunno. It did last year, but...”

This was the elevator Charlie and I had taken to the basement a year ago. Down there, we’d encountered Seed, the leader of SPES.

“Hmm?”

However, the instant the elevator doors shut, it was obvious that this time would be different. Orange light streaked across the inside of the mechanical box in a mazelike pattern—and then the floor buttons stood out like 3D images.

“...So we’ve got two options, huh?”

Only two floor numbers were displayed: B1 and B2. I didn’t know why this system had activated, but...I didn’t think the B2 option had been there last time.



Thinking I'd go with the safer option first, I pressed B1—and, with a dull *clunk*, the elevator began descending.

"Listen, if this still has power, isn't there a chance that someone's here?" Natsunagi whispered uneasily in my ear.

Yeah, it might be a good idea to prepare for that contingency. But we'd only brought the bare minimum of weapons with us. Natsunagi had left the musket on the boat. The tension around us was rising.

"Natsunagi, can you walk on your own?"

"Yes, we'll have to be ready to run, just in case."

"Yeah. Also, you are getting a little heavy."

"You know, I may actually hate you, Kimizuka."

While we were talking, the elevator reached the first basement.

This was the research facility's core, and the place where we'd both encountered Seed: six years ago for Natsunagi, one year ago for me. Although there shouldn't have been any members of SPES here, what we found was—

".....! Why are you here?"

The room held rows of culture tanks, and inside one of them was—the body of a familiar white-haired detective.

◆ **She's there, beside me, always**

"Siesta!"

Without stopping to think, I ran to her.

The contents of most of the cylindrical culture tanks weren't visible from the outside. However, one tank was filled with white smoke, and in it, I'd glimpsed a face I knew and loved.

Pale silver hair. Long eyelashes, made obvious by her closed eyes. And beauty that could only belong to one person. I was positive: Her name was—

"No, don't look!"

“Ow-ow-ow-ow! Your finger! It’s digging into my eye!”

Natsunagi had covered my eyes tightly from behind, and it felt like she was trying to crush my eyeballs.

“What the hell are you doing?!”

“Siesta’s not wearing anything! Don’t look!”

...Ah, I see. I hadn’t noticed at first glance because of the smoke, but apparently, she was naked.

“What’s she doing here, though?”

Putting a little distance between myself and the tank, I thought.

Siesta had died a year ago. However, her body had been put in frozen storage, then equipped with an artificial intelligence and reborn as SIESTA the maid. SIESTA’s artificial heart had been damaged in combat the other day, and she’d been transported to a hospital.

“She’s supposed to be in treatment now...”

Just as I was wondering about that—

“Yes, and this is the hospital, Kimihiko.”

A third party had spoken.

Involuntarily, I looked at Natsunagi. Her eyes had widened, too, and she was looking around the room.

Don’t tell me— As I turned back to take another look at the girl who was asleep in the tank...

“Where are you looking? I’m here. Right here.”

The voice was coming from the breast pocket of my jacket. My smartphone was in there. I took it out a little apprehensively, and...

“Are you stupid, Kimihiko?”

There was a girl in a maid uniform on the screen, and the first thing she did was call me names.

“...What are you doing, SIESTA?”

The white-haired girl was elegantly drinking tea, as if she was living there inside the phone.

“Why so surprised? I am merely an artificial intelligence, so I’m able to migrate myself to digital devices.”

“When did you hack my phone...?”

“I haven’t. I’m just sending my data to it via Bluetooth.”

“Easiest move ever!”

Had I enabled the connection by entering the room where her main unit was?

“Huh... Then if I sent an email to one of the facility’s computers, could you read it, SIESTA?”

“Yes. By all means, Nagisa, let’s discuss topics like ‘What’s the fifty-third thing you can’t stand about Kimihiko?’ later on. I think it will be fun.”

“Don’t host comedy events with terrible themes, and don’t think of fifty things you can’t stand about me!” ...Yeesh. I never thought I’d be forced to dish out comebacks in a place like this. “By the way, where did you get that tea you’ve been drinking?”

“Virtual goods purchase function. You’ll be billed for it at the end of the month along with your phone charges, so there’s no need to worry.”

“How does that even work...? Haaah. You look like you’re doing well, anyway. That’s great.”

“Yes, thankfully.”

In my hand, SIESTA smiled. Siesta’s physical body was apparently still in treatment, but at the very least, SIESTA the AI was fine.

“But SIESTA, did you say this was a hospital?” Natsunagi set a hand on my shoulder, peeking in at the smartphone.

“That’s right. The physician who’s treating me is currently living here.”

Here, at SPES’s former hideout? That seemed incredibly careless.

“This facility, or hospital, is particularly well-suited to treating irregular entities such as myself. After all, pseudohumans were developed here.”

...I see. Then it was the perfect place to treat her. It looked like her doctor was out at the moment, though.

“By the way, did that key prove useful?” Out of nowhere, SIESTA asked about the master key. The journey we’d been on for the past few days had begun when she’d given it to me.

“Yeah, it gave us a hint. We still have problems left to field, though.” As I spoke, I waved the key at her.

“I’m glad to hear it. In that case, return that key via the tray over there.”

“Could you be any less emotional...? Well, we probably won’t need to use it again anyway.”

Now that Siesta wasn’t going to use it to break into my house, it was probably fine to give it back.

“And? It’s rather late to ask, but what brings you two here?” On the screen, SIESTA cocked her head. Come to think of it, we hadn’t explained that yet.

“Kimizuka and I are traveling the globe in search of information about how to defeat Seed...or something like that.” Natsunagi spread her hands in a weary, exaggerated shrug. She’d seemed to be enjoying herself pretty well so far, or had that been my imagination?

“Oh? Just you and Kimihiko, alone together, hmm?” The corners of SIESTA’s lips curved up slightly, and she gazed out of the screen at Natsunagi.

“...So, since it doesn’t look like there’s anything else in here, we’ll need to move on.” Natsunagi looked away pointedly, scanning the room.

Yes, the best way to handle the white-haired maid’s teasing was to ignore it. There’s no telling who she learned it from, but she’ll mess with you for ages.

“Yeah, let’s go down one more floor. I want you to come, too, SIESTA.”

Whatever that change on the elevator was—my gut was telling me that it might lead us to the answer we were looking for. Quietly, I clenched my fists.

“Yes, that’s fine. However, more importantly, the physical distance between you and Nagisa is even smaller than before. Is it because something happened on this trip, while you were alone together?”

“You don’t have to tack on a joke now! Go on, focus on Kimizuka! He’s gazing at the elevator and looking resolute, all right?! He has his game face on!”

“Natsunagi, don’t use my game face as a punch line.”

◆ And so the enemy of the world was born

“So this is their central nervous system, huh...?”

Gazing at the enormous mechanical system several meters ahead, I sighed.

Several huge monitors sat in a row against the wall, with computer keyboards and control panels that would have looked at home in a jet cockpit in front of them. We’d gotten back into the elevator and taken it down here, to the second basement. This seemed to be one of the facility’s vital points.

“I had no idea this existed. Could it be a SPES database?” SIESTA, who was still in my smartphone, gazed at those enigmatic machines with deep interest. It was still only a possibility, but the information about Seed that we needed just might be in there.

“How do we use these, though? I can’t even tell where the power source is.” Natsunagi looked puzzled. Yeah, we’d have to boot up the system before we did anything.

“—Biometric authentication,” I said. Natsunagi’s eyes widened slightly. “I think the mechanism that woke up in the elevator back there might have been triggered by the same sort of authentication system.”

I’d ridden that elevator a year ago, and one thing was different now: I had that seed. The elevator’s authentication system might have mistaken me for Chameleon, a SPES executive.

“That means there’s a good possibility that we’ll be able to get in that way as well.” I walked over to stand in front of the machines.

I was about to trick the system.

“.....”

No response. Okay. Just as an experiment, then, I typed randomly on a keyboard, finishing off with a hard, flashy *clack!* Only the dry keystrokes echoed

in the silence.

“...Nothing’s happening.”

I waited another ten seconds, but the machines just sat there.

“Well, when Kimihiko starts trying to look cool, it rarely ends well. This isn’t surprising.”

“—Why am I the only one who never gets to be an MVP?!”

“I’m about...to trick the system.”

“Stop imitating me, stop reading my mind, and stop making fun of all my embarrassing moments!” I said all in a rush at the annoying white-haired maid on my screen.

“Kimizuka, could you scoot over a second?” Natsunagi waved her hand at me, shooing me away, and took my spot in front of the machines.

And the moment she did—

“...! It...turned on...?”

For a moment, that orange light flowed through the enormous, keyboard-type control panel, and then countless lines of text began to stream across the displays above it. The biometric authentication had worked...but for Natsunagi? Why? She’d only inherited a seed, like I had... Oh, wait. I get it. She’s not like me. She’s not like any of the other SPES executives, either.

“It’s Hel. She was the only executive Seed trusted.”

Trust. Since Seed had been planning to use Hel as his vessel, I didn’t think that five-letter word accurately described their relationship. But Natsunagi had used it. It had to be because she knew Hel had wanted Seed to love her.

“Well, that activated it. SIESTA, can I leave the rest to you?”

“Yes, now that we’re through the first barrier, I should be able to infiltrate the database.”

Taking the baton from Natsunagi, SIESTA vanished from my smartphone. A moment later, she’d taken up residence in the display in front of us.

“It looks as if I can access a list of the seeds Seed has, the experiment data

from the children who were candidate vessels, and various other pieces of information about SPES. Is there anything you're particularly interested in?" She was shuttling back and forth between multiple screens, pulling out files. It looked like she was physically hacking in.

"Right now, our main objective is finding out about Seed's weaknesses." I remembered the letter Siesta had left me in London, the one I'd read before coming to this island.

Siesta had been looking for the specific reason Seed couldn't adapt to Earth's environment. That should be the key to subjugating him, and it was what we most needed to know right now.

"I'll try accessing Seed's personal information."

With that, SIESTA temporarily winked out of sight. Before long, a 3D model with a geometric pattern on it popped up on the black screen.

"—The primordial seed, huh?"

That seed was Seed's main body, and the progenitor of all the clones.

However, as I watched the model revolve, I could see that the primordial seed was a little different from Chameleon's seed. There was an outer shell around the main part. What was that shell protecting it from?

"Seed is planning to take the form of this seed, get inside a human body, then take over and use it as his vessel." Natsunagi looked up at the screen, narrowing her eyes. "He's tried that and failed many times before. That's the whole reason he made this research facility: to raise a sturdy vessel that could withstand his seed." She bit her lip. She was remembering her past self, and the friends who'd fallen victim to him.

As she said, human bodies didn't adapt to the primordial seed easily. Bat hadn't even been able to completely adjust to an ordinary seed, and he had lost his sight as a side effect. The primordial seed would probably demand a much greater price, and a massive amount of nutrients, from the body that became its vessel. That meant Seed was constantly searching for a human vessel that wouldn't let him overpower it, one that wouldn't wither.

"It's likely that Seed became even more powerful in the process." Suddenly,

we heard SIESTA's voice from inside the machine. *"I believe that, as he was entering the bodies of living creatures in his seed form, he learned about their composition on a cellular level...and eventually, he acquired the ability to take on human form. That's also why he can create clones that have special organs."*

...I see. Seed had been constantly evolving ever since he reached this planet. That had to be out of obedience to his survival instinct as well.

"Even so, he must have a weakness."

If he didn't, he wouldn't want a human vessel badly enough to do something this big. Whatever kept him from adapting to Earth's environment would be his weak spot.

"Yes. However, at this point in time, I don't see any data that fits that description." SIESTA, who'd returned to my phone, shook her head.

Well, it was never going to be that simple. In that case... "SIESTA, can you check into the past movements of Seed and his clones?"

Even if the exact information we wanted wasn't there, with a vast database like this, there had to be something we could pick up on indirectly. If Seed had been using the sacred text to issue orders to his subordinates, it wouldn't be odd for him to have left a certain amount of detailed data behind.

"It does appear to be possible...but it's a bit frightening to hear you say that, Kimihiko. Rather stalkerish, really."

"Who'd stalk the enemy? Going through the trash of a girl in your grade is one thing, but..."

"Um, no, it's really not. And you seem like you just might do that, Kimizuka, so it's scarier." Natsunagi hugged her shoulders and leaped backward. That's weird. Why would she be so afraid of me? "...Oh, but wait. If you were stalking someone and going through her trash, would it be because you just couldn't get her out of your head? Because she was the focus of incredibly intense, hopeless love? ...If so, then...maybe?"

"No. And I was playing dumb; don't waste it."

Even during that pointless exchange, SIESTA had been analyzing the data, and

a detailed record of the actions of Seed and the other members of SPES had begun scrolling across the screens.

“—It’s Hel.” Natsunagi had spotted the name of her other self.

“She did more than anybody else, huh,” I murmured. The screen was filled with Hel’s past actions over the span of several years.

As a SPES executive, as Seed’s right hand, she’d carried out her work more faithfully than anyone else. She couldn’t have known she was fated to be consumed as Seed’s vessel one day.

“The other executives don’t seem to have done anything too attention-grabbing, though.” As she examined the data, Natsunagi seemed to have picked up on something. She sounded mystified.

“Cerberus and Chameleon, you mean? Well, they did seem less like the cautious types and more the sort that lurked in the shadows and worked undercover, but... No, hang on.” Just then, an idea had run through my brain like a jolt of electricity. “Is that what it is?”

Looking at the monitors, I double-checked the clones’ action patterns. “SIESTA, look into the histories of Seed and his clones again...and get times, places, and what the weather was like that day.”

“Understood. I’ll work enough to pay for my virtual goods.” SIESTA went back into the database and began accessing information.

“Kimizuka, you can’t mean...” Natsunagi’s red eyes were wide. Apparently, she’d come to the same conclusion I had.

“Yeah. We may have found Seed’s weakness.”

Of course, a theory was just a theory. Without sufficient examples and solid evidence, it would probably end as a fantasy. Even so, I’d seen a glimmer of hope. If we could organize the data, deduce and deduce again, then verify it, I was sure—

“Kimihiro, I’m sorry. I can continue extracting data, but we may not have that much time,” SIESTA said from my smartphone. The next moment, I got a call from an unfamiliar number.

“...With this timing, I think you’d better pick up,” Natsunagi prompted me. She looked grave.

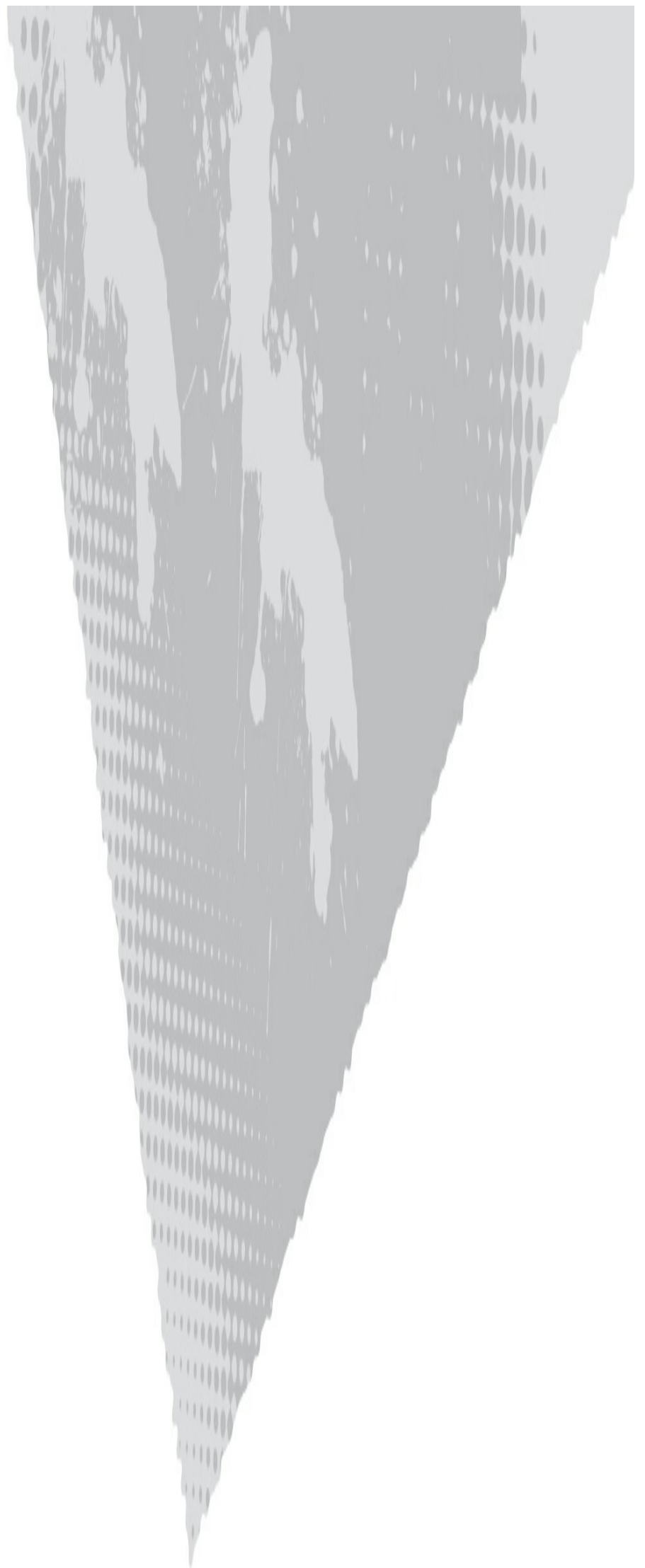
I hit the TALK button. “Hello?”

From the receiver, I heard *“Kimihiro? Listen carefully.”*

It was the voice of a girl I’d spoken with just recently. She sounded as if she was trying not to panic.

“Return home immediately. Within the next twenty-four hours, Seed is going to attack Japan.”

It was the Oracle, Mia Whitlock, prophesying a global crisis.



A certain man's tale

"I-I'm exhausted..."

Sounding faint, the girl sank down right where she was.

She sang and danced to exhaustion on a regular basis, so she had to be stronger than the average person. If she was whining this much, she really must be close to her limit. In that case, I didn't have much choice.

"Let's go for another hour, then take a break."

"How much stamina do you have?!"

Shaking her streaked hair until it was a complete mess, Yui Saikawa howled like a dog. "Break! Break! We're taking a break right now! I'm exercising my authority as the family head!"

Then she sprawled on the floor of the dojo, kicking and flailing with every ounce of energy in her little body. Apparently, she was determined not to move from that spot.

"I'll wait five minutes, then."

We'd left Fuubi Kase's condo, then met up at the martial arts gym at the Saikawa residence the next day. We were now on our third day of special training to awaken Saikawa's left eye. She hadn't improved enough yet, though. As things stood, she really wouldn't be able to go toe-to-toe with Seed.

"Listen, the amount of visual information you get from that left eye is astronomically greater than normal humans. Use that to watch your opponent's movements and—"

"No lectures during breaks! You rest, too, Bat!"

Getting scolded by a little girl is a pretty rare experience. Savoring the novelty, I retracted my tentacle into my right ear. At the very least, I had to train that left eye until she could completely avoid my attacks.

“I just assumed you’d train me to produce one of those,” Yui said, sitting up. “You know, since there’s a seed in me as well. I thought maybe a tentacle would sprout from my left eye... Although that would be a little grotesque,” she murmured, looking rather repulsed.

“Ha-ha! You don’t need to be able to sprout one of these. In fact, you probably shouldn’t.”

Laughing at myself, I started to explain how mine worked. “It may look like a tentacle, but it’s more like a fully grown shoot that sprouted from the seed. I can change its hardness and flexibility at will, and no matter how many times it’s cut off, it’ll grow back. As a weapon, it’s definitely handy.”

“In that case—”

“Problem is,” I interrupted, “if there’s a sprout, it’s proof that the seed’s taken your whole body as nourishment.”

Yeah. These seeds gave humans astounding physical abilities and healing capacity, and some sort of superpower, but in exchange, they demanded a vast quantity of nutrients from their hosts. You gained something, you lost something; Seed’s seeds were a double-edged sword.

“So that’s why your eyes...”

That’s right. The seed had taken my sight as the price for my bat ears. There had been others in SPES who’d become *half-pseudohumans* like me, lost most of their life spans to nourish the seed, and had withered away and died... Really, dying normally might not be the worst option. If the seed ate through its entire food source, and even then, your body couldn’t die...

“But in your case, young lady, I doubt you’ll have to worry about that.” I wasn’t saying it to comfort her. It was unrelenting fact, and that’s how I delivered it. “For better or for worse, Seed singled you out as a candidate vessel. Before that seed—your left eye—was planted in you, proper steps were taken to head off side effects. It’s hard to imagine that thing could sprout after this long.”

The eye disease she’d suffered from when she was tiny had been completely healed by the astonishing powers of recovery the seed had given her. The

possibility that she'd develop side effects from it at this point was nearly nonexistent.

"...I see. So that's why Siesta and Hel couldn't produce tentacles, either, even though they had seeds."

"Yeah, you could say that's a condition for being a candidate vessel: whether or not you can keep the seed from going out of control and avoid side effects."

Meaning when the seed sprouted, you'd get some sort of side effect. Or maybe that was the sign that you already had one.

"I wonder if Kimizuka will be all right," Yui said in a little voice. He wasn't even here.

"He probably had a wish he wanted granted so badly that the risk didn't bother him."

In that case, there was no room for other people to butt in. And even if he was on a path leading straight through hell, he wasn't allowed to stop. Not as long as that was the future he'd chosen.

"Right now, worry about yourself." I'd said she didn't need to stress about side effects, but that also meant Seed would keep targeting her as a vessel. Until we took him down, her safety would never be guaranteed.

"Heh. You're surprisingly overprotective, Bat." For some reason, the sapphire girl smiled at me. "Oh, but no matter how important I am, you shouldn't fall in love with an idol. After all, you're not Kimizuka."

What the heck is she saying? Don't talk to me like you'd talk to your friends.

"Ha! You keep bringing him up." However, the next thing I knew, I was teasing her, too.

"...Don't hit me where it hurts, please. I specialize in playing dumb, attacking, and joking around."

I see. Communicating is hard. During the years I'd spent in the villa, I'd completely forgotten how it was done... Nah, I guess I've been like this since I was born. Ha-ha.

"Still, why are you so protective of me?" she asked, abruptly changing gears.

That's a subject I don't want people looking at too closely, but if I had to say...

"You probably seem a little like her," I murmured.

...It's not so bad I need to avoid it, either. I was remembering how she'd looked, so long ago.

"Huh? But I'm Japanese."

She probably understood who I was talking about.

Yui had mentioned that because she'd realized she didn't physically resemble my sister.

"Right. Of your friends, the agent girl probably comes closest in appearance. She has blond hair and emerald green eyes, right?"

"Oh, yes, you mean Charlie... I see. So your sister's eyes and hair were the same color as yours."

Yeah. It had been a cesspool of a family, just rotten all around. In the midst of all that, though, that little kid's blond hair had shone in the sunlight, and her eyes had sparkled like jewels when she smiled. And she'd smiled at me. —That was more than twenty years ago.

"So you mean I resemble your sister on the inside?"

"Yeah, that's about the size of it." As I spoke, I was retracing old memories. "You're both really brazen, for example."

"We don't resemble each other at all, then!"

"What are you talking about? You're identical." Including her genuine puzzlement at that remark. "She was impudent and spoiled, and she knew I had a soft spot for her smile— But deep down, she was straightforward and kind, a strong girl who knew how to care about others."

Because she'd been that sort of little sister, I'd—

"Okay, break's over."

Before any more little revelations could escape me, I pushed her to get back to training.

I hadn't meant to ramble on like that. However, I still had a ton of things I

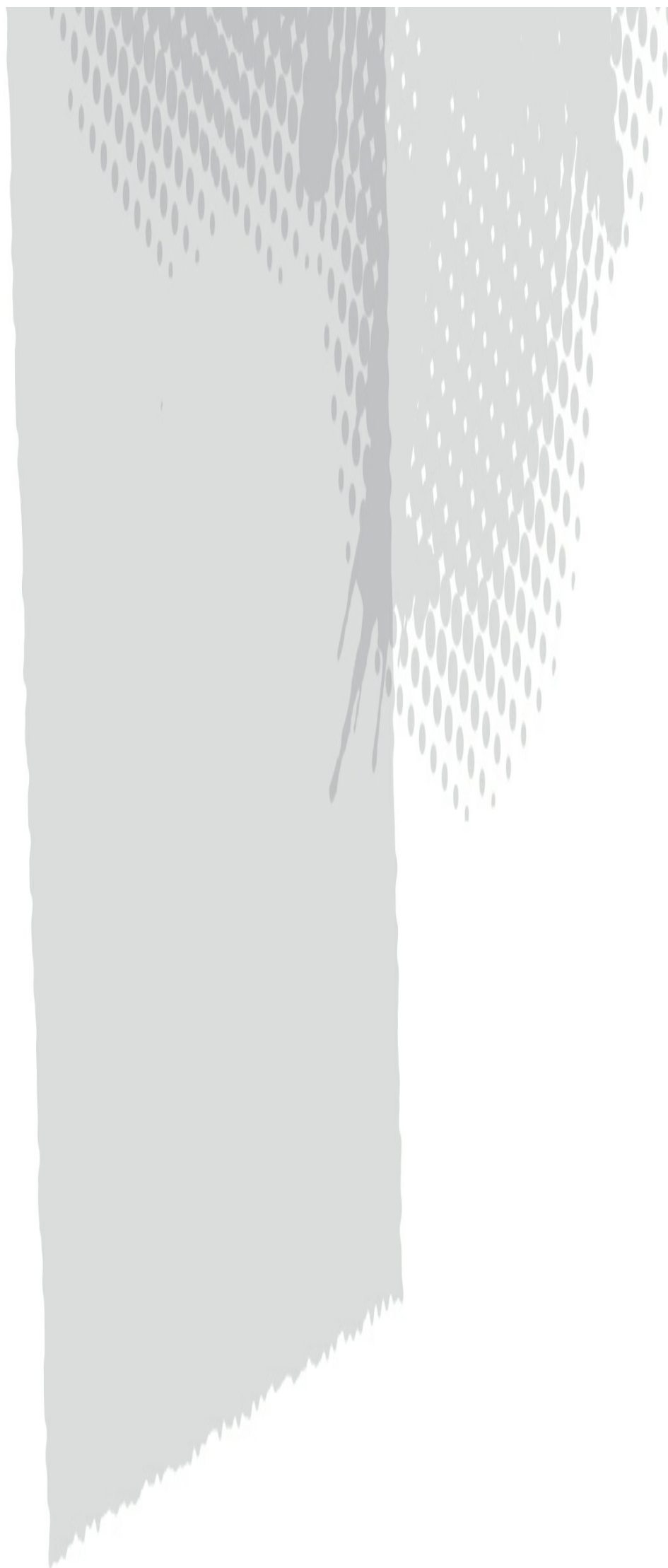
needed to teach the sapphire girl if we were going to be squaring up with Seed before too long. I reluctantly got to my feet—and just then...

“Bat,” Yui called to me. “Is it all right if I talk about him just one more time?”

“...What’s up?”

What she told me next determined our fate.

“Kimizuka sent a text. Seed’s going to come to us soon.”



Chapter 5

◇ Another storyteller

Somewhere in Japan, in a certain abandoned factory...

“Bat, are you okay?!”

As rain drummed on the factory roof, the sapphire girl called my name. She didn’t have to shout it; I could hear her just fine, but apparently my wounds looked ugly enough to really shake her up.

“...Ha! This is nothing.”

That said, I was practically blind, so it wasn’t like I could see them.

We’d fled into this abandoned factory, and I leaned against a rusted pillar, grinning. We’d left the Saikawa residence and had been on the run from the enemy for more than half a day.

They’d struck out of nowhere. Seed seemed to want his new vessel more urgently than we’d figured. That said, the guy hadn’t shown himself yet. I’d gotten messed up this bad by a lowly SPES survivor. Apparently, my time in the big house had done a number on my skills.

“People don’t bleed that much when it’s nothing!” For some reason, the sapphire girl was yelling at me. She’d found a spot where the bleeding was particularly heavy and was trying to stanch the flow with her handkerchief.

“Which of us is overprotective?” I joked. It was so awkward being taken care of by a girl who was twenty-odd years younger than me.

“You can’t call this ‘overprotective.’ If you were Kimizuka, I’d have to hold you close and pat your head to keep you from bawling.”

What does that guy *do* with his time?

“Well, to be honest, having my right ear out of commission actually is a

problem.”

That ear was where the seed was attached. If it was busted, I couldn’t use my bat-like hearing. When the enemy attacked, I would be none the wiser.

“I guess that’s just what I get for letting that guy get away back then. I was lazy. What goes around comes around.”

The SPES survivor who was chasing us was the man who’d tried to attack the sapphire girl with a crossbow at the concert. If I’d had time for a smoke, I guess I should have used it to go after him.

“Is he a pseudohuman, too? When we were running, I saw something that looked like a tentacle.”

“He’s a half-pseudohuman like me; he just forcibly attached a seed to himself. Back when I was still in the organization, I heard his ability was using poison.”

The arrow that had grazed my right ear had been coated with something toxic. What a typically crooked, “survivors on the run” type of move. I couldn’t remember if the guy’s code name had been *Jellyfish Man* or something a little cooler, but either way, his role in this story was tiny. So maybe that meant I wasn’t wrong to have a smoke instead of chasing him. Ha-ha!

“I hope Kimizuka gets here soon...,” the sapphire girl murmured in a small voice as she patched me up. The text had given us an early warning about the enemy’s attack, at least.

“You’re awfully honest about your feelings when he isn’t around.”

“...You aren’t allowed to mess with me. You’re a cool older man; you should know these things.” Speaking rapidly, she bound my wound tightly with her handkerchief. She’s an open book.

“Do you really think he’s gonna come back with a way to beat Seed?” I wanted to know if the girl trusted him that much.

“Yes, I trust him,” she said immediately. “That’s why I took the mic instead of the pistol. Because I believed him.”

“...Oh, that’s right.” She could say that because she’d resolved to walk alongside her friends, instead of living for revenge. She could smile now

because she hadn't resented, hadn't doubted. She'd forgiven, believed, and left her hesitation behind. People would probably roll their eyes at that and say she was all talk, but Yui Saikawa would shut them all up with a single mic. She had the strength for it. And I'd definitely never had that.

"Saikawa! You okay?!"

Just then, the factory's heavy door opened.

"Kimizuka!"

The timing was like a reminder that those who had faith would be saved. Although the sapphire girl didn't stop treating me and run to him, she shouted excitedly at the messiah who'd just walked in. "I've been waiting for you for ages... Honestly! We haven't been able to talk for three days, so I intend to have you thoroughly spoil me. And the fight— I'll overlook it."

"Ha-ha. Sorry about that."

"? Kimizuka, you're being genuine... I suppose that does happen sometimes." The sapphire girl looked bewildered, but her friend's return had relieved her.

Wow, she trusts the guy that much? Should I be jealous about this?

"Huh? Where's Nagisa?"

"Oh, she's running a bit behind. She'll be here later." As he spoke, I could hear Kimihiko Kimizuka's voice coming closer. Without my sight or my right ear to help me, it was hard to judge the distance.

"Sorry. It feels like the handkerchief around my wound is coming undone," I told the sapphire girl, indirectly asking her to retie it.

"Huh? Oh, honestly. You're a lot of trouble, too, aren't you, Bat?" ...But for some reason, as she came over to me, her voice was light and happy.

Sorry, but I'm not giving you this girl, I silently told the guy who was standing in front of us.

"Bat, thank you for protecting Saikawa all this time."

"Ha-ha! Hey, I didn't do it for you." It sounded like a fight over a girl, peppered with jokes. *Geez, why do I have to do this?* I thought, but I played my

part. “We’ve been enemies since we met, you and I. There’s no way I’d do anything to help you.”

I’d never side with this guy, and vice versa. That’s how it’s always been.

“But you’ve cut your ties to SPES, haven’t you, Bat? In that case...,” Yui said.

“Ha! I only joined SPES because there was something I had to do anyway.”

Let me confess, once again, that I never felt anything like loyalty to SPES.

“Long ago, I had a sister who was much younger than I was. The family we were born into was *the pits*, so the day she turned six, she was sent to a certain orphanage so there’d be one less mouth to feed at home. When you live in the slums, it’s a common story.”

As I spoke about the past, I lit my last remaining cigarette, working by feel.

“I was so green back then, though. I seriously thought I was gonna get out of that dump of a world one day and go get my sister. I didn’t even go to school; I just worked. When I was thirteen, I started doing business under the table, too, so I could make more money faster. Then, while I was working as a mule—I learned about SPES.”

I tipped my head back, blowing a tall column of smoke.

“Before too long, I figured out that those guys ran the orphanage where my sister was. Thought it was fishy, so I wormed my way into SPES.”

“And that’s why you joined...”

“Right. However, the more checking around I did, the surer I was that my sister was in danger, and I didn’t have a moment to lose. So I resorted to a forbidden method.”

“You stole one of Seed’s seeds?” This time, the question was in Kimihiko Kimizuka’s voice.

“Yeah. I figured if I had ears that could hear voices a hundred kilometers away, I’d find my sister again someday. As a matter of fact, I used those to steal information and locate the orphanage...but she wasn’t there anymore. But I believed that if I followed orders and kept flying around the world, I was bound to see her again someday. After more than ten years had gone by—”

My sister had died.

“Or actually, I should say she’d been dead all along. I spent more than a decade collecting information, and in the end, I learned that my sister had died in an experiment ages back. That was also when they tumbled to my plot and decided to punish me, ten years after the fact.”

The result had been that hijacking, four years ago.

That was how SPES and I had parted ways in earnest.

“Even then, I didn’t give up. I’d sworn to myself that I wouldn’t die until I’d seen my sister again. See, as I was zipping all over the world as a SPES member, I’d heard a certain rumor.”

“—The vampire,” Yui murmured quietly. She’d seen him, too.

“Yeah, that’s right. They said he had the ability to bring the dead back to life. If that turned out to be true, I’d be able to see my sister again.”

“But that ability isn’t...”

“Right. His ability to resurrect the dead wasn’t what I was hoping for.”

Scarlet’s “undead” had lost everything but the strongest instinct they’d had in life. They were nothing but zombies. I couldn’t genuinely get my wish that way.

“And so my dream finally collapsed. It’ll never come true.”

“So instead, you said you’d cooperate with us?” Kimizuka’s voice asked.

If my own wish wouldn’t come true, had I at least tried to help someone else out?

“Ha-ha! Hey, c’mon. You think I’m that noble?”

I’d never taken him for the type to make crappy jokes. I stubbed my cigarette out on the concrete floor.

“I’ve been wrung out like a dishrag. This is all that’s left of me—my stubborn mulishness. I wouldn’t even call it a will, really. If I had to give it a name, what’s driving me now is an inner impulse, the petty *desire for revenge*—”

My body had recovered a little, and I forced myself to my feet.

“Bat...?”

“Stay behind me.”

I sheltered Yui Saikawa, who’d sounded mystified, behind my back.

“The one thing I still had to do was—”

I pointed my gun at *the man who’d been pretending to be Kimihiko Kimizuka* all this time.

“...kill you with my own two hands—Seed.”

◇ Villain

I fired with no hesitation, and the bullet punched right through Seed’s forehead.

—Except...

“I see. So you caught on,” he said calmly. He barely even reacted to it. Apparently, just putting a hole in his skull wasn’t enough to stop this enemy from moving.

However, the tone of his voice and the way he spoke were completely different from what they’d been before. My blind eyes couldn’t see him, but he’d probably shed Kimihiko Kimizuka’s shape and resumed his own form. I was pretty sure his default had been a youngish white-haired guy.

“No...” Beside me, Yui sounded dazed.

Her excellent vision had made it easier to get tricked. The man in front of us was Seed: the father of all the pseudohumans, and our greatest enemy. He could change his shape at will, and he’d come to steal Yui Saikawa, his vessel, while pretending he was here to save a friend.

“How did you know?” Seed asked quietly. My gun was still trained on him.

“Yeah, I can’t hear sounds a hundred kilometers away anymore. I shouldn’t really have been able to unmask you at this point.”

But too bad, Seed. You’re special.

“Every cell in my body, every drop of blood, has been yelling all this time. It

would never let me miss the heartbeat of my sworn enemy. Even if you run to the far side of hell, this surge won't stop."

I fired again, aiming for the spot where I sensed the enemy.

"And why would I need to run?"

There was no sense that I'd hit anything, though. All that came back to me was a cold, emotionless voice. And then—

"Look out!"

A light impact ran through my lower abdomen. It wasn't an enemy attack, though... The sapphire girl? I let her knock me over.

"...I pushed down an adult."

"No, that was a good call. You saved me."

Patting her head carelessly, I got back up.

"I see. So the girl has also begun to use *my seed* properly?"

I could hear something whirring, cutting through the air. Seed was probably whipping his tentacles around. The sapphire girl had detected the attack before I did, and her quick thinking had kept me from taking a fatal injury.

"It's thanks to Bat's special training, not you," Yui told Seed. "My left eye can read your movements perfectly now...!"

That was the new way Yui had learned to use her left eye. Ordinarily, when people begin to move, they use muscles in other areas of their body first. The sapphire eye can register these *warnings*, these little warm-ups, a few seconds early. It's a feat she can pull off because she's capable of seeing each individual fiber of her opponent's muscles. Of course, she hadn't had enough training yet to use the full extent of her ability.

"With this power, I can evade any attack. You may be a pseudohuman or an alien, but we'll never lose to you."

Even so, Yui bluffed and declared her intention to fight alongside me.

And what did I say to that trusty ally?

"No, you cut and run, right now." I told her, briefly, that fleeing before the

enemy was the best move. “I’ll buy time. I can put in that much work. Which means, little lady, you better—”

“—No!”

She must have known I’d say that, too. Even without using that left eye.

“What is this? Don’t tell me it’s the ‘You go on ahead, I’ll handle this’ routine? That’s such a cliché these days,” Yui snapped, as if some sort of dam had burst inside her. “It doesn’t suit you, Bat. You sound like a poser. The only people allowed to say that stuff are, like, high school seniors who have that protagonist type of personality: a guy who feels omnipotent to the point where it’s rather cringey, but is oblivious about that. You, Bat, are a cool, older hard-liner who was once our enemy but has been kind enough to take our side, and people like you aren’t supposed to say things like that. Because, I mean—”

“Get down!”

Apparently, just this once, my intuition had beaten that left eye. As I shielded Yui Saikawa, the tentacle told me as much by stabbing into my back.

“I mean, it makes it sound like you’ve decided this is where you’ll die, you know?”

Yui seemed to be crying.

That’s strange. I always thought people were happier about it when you saved their lives.

“Everybody’s got a role to play.” The severe pain was trying to make my mind shut down, but I did my best to speak calmly. “Nagisa Natsunagi inherited the previous Ace Detective’s wish and is taking down the world’s enemies. Yui Saikawa, you shouldered your parents’ feelings and keep singing. And I have a mission to be the last one on the battlefield.”

“That’s just... All that, just to protect me...?”

“...Ha-ha! Don’t get the wrong idea. It’s not to protect you, little lady.”

I straightened up, turning my back on Yui. “I’m staying here for one reason only: to slaughter that guy with my own two hands.”

I wasn’t sacrificing myself in order to save somebody. My role was to end my

sworn enemy personally, right here.

“—I see. So you’re a defective variety as well?”

The next moment, Seed started radiating a miasma-like aura so intense that I didn’t need eyes to sense it. I guessed that countless tentacles were heading my way.

“Then, as your parent, I must prune you from the vine.”

The tips of those sharp tentacles streaked toward me like whips. —However.

“You’re the one who should be cut down, Seed.”

I heard something like spraying body fluid. A sharp blade had severed the tentacles with a single stroke.

“Charlie...!” As her companion arrived, Yui seemed relieved.

“I’m sorry. An enemy attack held me up.” The blond girl swung her sword, shaking Seed’s fluids off its blade. “In exchange, I hunted down all the survivors.”

I see. So she’d dealt with the guy who’d rotted my ear, too. Her arrival was going to make my wish come true now.

“Can I count on you?”

“...You mean that’s *my role* in this situation, don’t you?”

It’s great that she’s so quick on the uptake. That nasty cop turns out some pretty good agents.

“...! Charlie, why?!” As her friend picked her up, Yui cried out, bewildered.

“I’m sorry, Yui. You can hit me as many times as you want later.” With that, carrying Yui Saikawa, the girl who’d showed up to help turned her back on me.

“I hope you safely carry out your mission.”

With that classic agent line, she took off.

The only sound that still lingered in my ears was the sobs of a young girl.

“Is this the development you were hoping for?”

I thought I could hear something scorching—but that was a sound I knew

meant Seed's tentacles were regrowing.

"If so, it was a poor move. If you let the vessel escape when she's on the brink of death, the survival instincts of the seed inside her will grow stronger, and she'll be more compatible as my vessel."

Yeah, probably. The attack on Yui at her dome concert the other day had only been a threat. By exposing her to mortal danger, he'd boosted her survival instincts, making her a more durable vessel. However, that had no bearing whatsoever on this situation.

"Ha-ha! How many times are you going to make me say it? I stayed here for one reason: to kill you myself."

I turned the tip of the tentacle that grew from my right ear on Seed.

"Ah. So that seed isn't completely dead yet?"

No matter how hopeless my position might get, I still had this. A kid killing his parent—that's an oddly amusing development, don't you think?

...Ha-ha. Nice. At the very, very end, this got entertaining. At least until the curtain came down, it could be fun to make like the protagonist of this story and act like a hero.

"Obey the laws of nature and breathe your last." Seed's countless sharp tentacles sped toward me.

And, with my last fight staring me in the face, what did I say?

"Ha-ha! You're the one who's gonna die!"

Hmm, yeah.

Apparently, once you've been a villain, it's a pretty hard role to shake.

◇ The last remaining survival instinct

Our tentacles struck at each other, their tips aiming for our opponent's heart, throat, head. I heard spraying fluids and smelled the blood. The fact that my tentacle was the same type as Seed's kept me from falling too far behind. Seed was the original, though, the progenitor of all pseudohumans, and he had every special organ and ability that Chameleon and the other clones had.

I'd spent twenty years constantly honing my bat ears, but faced with an overwhelming monster like that, I was just a former human. How many minutes—how many *seconds*—had I managed to stay on my feet?

"It's useless. You won't last much longer."

Seed's emotionless voice sounded far away.

That wasn't because he actually was, though. My consciousness was fading. I was on my knees, and I tried to get back on my feet by pushing myself up with my right arm. Then I remembered I'd lost that arm already.

"...Ha-ha! Harsh..."

Seed's tentacle had lopped my right arm off at the shoulder. Even as I felt thick, lukewarm blood dripping from the stump, I managed to get up.

"...*But I took your right ear.*"

My tentacle had cut off one of Seed's ears, and I tossed it aside. I knew it would grow back pretty fast, of course. Even so, the ability that matched mine was the one that would give me the most trouble, so I'd had to take it.

"Why would you go this far in order to fight?" Seed asked impassively.

I couldn't see, there was a hole in my gut, and I'd lost an arm...but I was still on my feet again. He sounded truly, utterly mystified, from the bottom of his heart.

...Nah, it wasn't like he had a heart in the first place. He was just a seed that had flown here from outer space. There wasn't much point in trying to have a conversation with him.

"This thirst for revenge is my 'survival instinct.' It's what's keeping me alive right now," I replied.

I thought about what those words meant—revenge, retaliation, vengeance. Was there any meaning in those things, really?

...I'd thought there was.

That was why I'd brought them up with the sapphire girl. I'd told her to shoot the enemy who'd killed her parents with a bullet of vengeance. To exorcise her

parents' regrets.

But she hadn't. Instead of a pistol, she'd chosen a microphone. I mean, I wasn't saying she was wrong now, of all times. I didn't even have the right to.

The problem was what did that mean for me? What should I do?

Right. That's all this was about.

"What did you find amusing?" Seed asked, out of nowhere.

Oh. Was I smiling?

The excruciating pain was making my mind hazy, so I hadn't noticed.

"Oh, you know. I was just remembering a line I'd heard somewhere."

Revenge produces nothing. Nobody wants revenge.

Hate only begets more hate.

I'd wanted to knock down any hypocrite who tried to feed me a line like that.

The dead don't want revenge?

Who do you think you are, huh? Why are you speaking for the dead?

If the dead don't talk, then don't you talk, either.

I'd carry out my long-cherished ambition without taking orders from anybody.

"I see. Shall we continue until you meet your end?" Seed murmured, sounding faintly disappointed. He'd probably seen the tentacle regrow from my right ear.

I hadn't managed to give him the answer he was looking for. Still, talking had never been what I wanted. I wanted mortal combat. It wouldn't be long before that was over, too.

"Yeah, but don't be in such a hurry. You're meeting your end right along with me, Seed."

The cell phone inside my breast pocket vibrated, telling me *the preparations* were complete. I took out the detonator I'd been hiding and hit the switch. Instantly, the thing that was buried right under Seed's feet blew up, enveloping the enemy in flames before I could blink.

You guessed it: I hadn't run into this abandoned factory because I was losing. I'd done my homework and laid a trap here to corner Seed.

"—A bomb, hmm? Yes, if I had been human, that wouldn't have been a bad move."

However, Seed's low voice spoke from the raging flames. And then—

".....! Ha..."

A burning tentacle shot out of the fire, piercing my chest. It seared my windpipe, and breathing got a whole lot harder. I didn't even know how many holes I had in me.

"...I guess I really am no match for you." The voice was so hoarse it didn't seem like mine. Even so, I set my left hand on the tentacle Seed had impaled me with and dug my fingers into it. "On my own, I can't kill you. I can't burn you with these flames."

The primordial seed wasn't just a plant, and fire that wasn't at least two thousand degrees Celsius couldn't burn him.

That was why we had come up with a certain plan.

It was our first and last team play: We'd use this trap to defeat an enormous evil.

The tentacle from my right ear lashed out to bind Seed, blazing flames and all.

"Bat, do you intend to die here as well?"

"I almost lost this life four years ago anyway."

But if this ended up granting the wish I'd harbored for so long...would it mean that white-haired ace detective had fulfilled my request, too? *If so, that's a hell of an ironic twist*, I thought, laughing to myself.

"Sorry, Seed. What's going to kill you isn't me or the flames from that bomb."

The next moment, the time bomb I'd rigged up to the factory's ceiling exploded, blowing the metal roof off. And peeking in through that mutilated roof and the billowing black smoke was...

"What's going to burn you is—the sun."

◆ Mic and pistol

“What is this...?”

When I reached the abandoned factory Saikawa had told me about, what I saw left me speechless. Except for a few pillars, the building had been demolished, reduced to a pile of rubble.

“He blew it up... The whole factory...” Natsunagi barely managed to get the words out. She was standing next to me, shielding her eyes from the thick smoke.

At SPES’s research facility, we’d come up with the *theory that Seed’s weakness was the sun*, and before we’d reached this factory, we’d put together a plan. We’d lure Seed to a specific place, and while Bat was keeping him pinned down, Natsunagi and I would blow the roof off with a bomb, drenching him with sunlight.

However, to make sure the plan succeeded, and in order to verify our theory, Bat had acted alone and blown up the entire factory. By now, the fight seemed to be over. The victor was—

“Bat...?”

In the midst of the smoke and the flickering flames, a man in a torn-up suit was standing with his back to us. When I looked closer, I realized that his right arm was gone.

“.....!”

I took an impulsive step toward him, but—

“That’s not Bat anymore.”

A girl’s voice stopped me. Right in front of me, blond hair streamed in the wind, and a slim golden sword cut down the tentacle that had reached out for me.

“Charlie...?”

Charlotte Arisaka Anderson, agent extraordinaire, held her blade at the ready and glared at her target. “He’s been taken over by the primordial seed. We blew it. I knew Yui wasn’t the only one Seed could use as a vessel, and yet...”

“...! Seed’s using Bat as a temporary vessel?”

Why? Simple: *To protect himself from the sun.*

Just the other day, Seed had plotted to spring Bat from prison and keep him nearby. This might have been what he was after. To Seed, Bat had been *emergency rations*.

“Bat...”

My former rival turned around, his head cocked at an unnatural angle, and fixed unfocused purple eyes on me. Our plan, and Bat’s gamble, hadn’t quite managed to finish off the enemy.

“...! Kimizuka, Nagisa, get back!” Even before Charlie screamed at us, the tentacle that had sprouted from Bat’s—no, Seed’s—back had split into three and attacked all of us.

“I don’t recall saying I would never hold a pistol again.”

Just then, a shot rang out.

There was a short howl, and Seed spat out red blood.

Slowly, he turned around. Yui Saikawa stood there. Instead of a mic, she was holding a pistol with both hands.

“I’ll avenge him.”

She gave a sad little smile.

I was sure the emotion wasn’t simple enough for the word *revenge* to cover. As she’d sworn on that night, she wouldn’t let grudges or hatred hold her down anymore. Even so, Saikawa had fired a bullet full of determination for her companions who walked beside her, in order to link our story to the future.

“—Unless I make time to recover, this is going to be difficult.”

As Seed murmured, he was looking at the new bullet hole in his stomach. Before Bat had become his vessel, had he been able to inflict even a few moments’ worth of sun damage on him? Using his tentacles as springs, Seed shot up into the sky. Then he disappeared, his figure melting into the surrounding air. Just like Chameleon.

Once he was gone, the four of us slowly gathered on a corner of the former battlefield.

“Is everyone all right?” Charlie asked.

We hadn’t seen one another for a few days, but we were all so ragged we might have been fighting for years.

“Yeah, we’re alive.”

—But.

“Just surviving wasn’t the goal, though.”

What we really wanted was to defeat Seed.

Yes, the enemy had attacked suddenly, but we’d meant to catch him off guard and defeat him here. We hadn’t been thorough enough. We’d fallen a step short, and our worst enemy was on the loose again. My head began to hang in disappointment.

“—Still, we are alive.”

I looked up. Was it Natsunagi’s “word-soul” ability?

No, I was sure that wasn’t it. This was the character she, and only she, possessed.

“As long as we’re alive, we can keep trying. We’ll fight as often as it takes. We can get back up, over and over and over.” Natsunagi was wearing a rather impish smile.

It was a total cliché. If I’d said something like that, I bet people would have told me it was corny, but coming from her, it couldn’t have sounded better. That bothered me, but there it was. Hearing her voice, her words—it turned our focus to the future in a way I didn’t really understand. It had nothing to do with her red eyes or word-soul ability. It was Natsunagi’s passion and her powerful, powerful will.

“So the sun is definitely Seed’s weakness?” Charlie asked. She wanted to know what had been behind this maneuver.

“Yeah, Natsunagi and I based that theory on data we found at SPES’s test

facility...and Bat put his life on the line to prove it.”

With SIESTA’s help, we’d checked into the movements of Seed and his clones. We’d discovered that any obvious moves they made always happened at night, or during bad weather.

When I thought back carefully, in London a year ago, Cerberus had attacked people for their hearts under the cover of darkness. He’d tried to kill me late at night as well. Later on, I remembered there’d been a sudden downpour on the day Seed had visited our apartment disguised as Ms. Fuubi. And then a month ago, on that cruise ship, Chameleon hadn’t shown himself to us until after sundown, even though he’d kidnapped Natsunagi earlier.

All these things suggested that Seed and his clones were avoiding the sun. They probably couldn’t live in sunlight. No matter where you went on Earth, the sun was the one thing you couldn’t escape.

That was why Seed had created SPES, and why he’d had Bat and Hel do the bulk of the work: Their original bodies were human, and the sun didn’t bother them. Then he’d worked on developing human vessels so that he’d be able to conquer the sun himself one day.

However, this had been no more than a theory.

...Until just now, when Bat had risked his life to demonstrate it.

“What a pretty blue sky.” Saikawa looked up, pensively.

The rain from earlier that morning had cleared completely.

This was a man-made sun break, though. We’d created it to help our maneuver succeed. Seed was a cautious enemy; he wouldn’t show himself to us easily. He’d attacked in an attempt to secure Saikawa today, even though it was morning, because thick rain clouds had blocked the sun. However—

“Yeah, because a thousand missiles erased the clouds.”

It was a technique adapted from cloud seeding, one that had already entered practical use in Russia and several other countries. Military planes were used to scatter liquid nitrogen, dispersing the clouds, while missiles packed with silver iodide destroyed active rain clouds. The redheaded police officer had arranged

all that; I'd have to thank her later.

"Honestly, Kimizuka. You never care about the mood." Gazing at me coldly, Saikawa heaved a big sigh.

Man, that's not fair.

However, I hadn't seen that expression in ages, and it did make me smile. "We've got another reason to fight now," I said, looking at the cigarette butt that lay on the concrete.

"Bat protected me to the end." Saikawa was gazing at the distant sky again. "I lost sight of the enemy, but my left eye knows which way he went."

We didn't need to ask her what she meant. The next thing I knew, Natsunagi and Charlie were both looking in the same direction, at the summer sky.

Yeah, I know.

This story began four years ago for me—and now I would end it.

"Today, the four of us will defeat Seed."

◆ If you swear not to die

A sedan was traveling down a coastal road.

"Charlie, turn left at the next corner, then go straight for a while."

"Thanks, Yui. I'm going to speed a bit."

Charlie was at the wheel, with Saikawa riding shotgun and navigating. Clouds had blocked the sun again, and it had started to rain. The four of us were driving in the direction Seed had gone.

"We're really doing this? All on our own?" Charlie glanced at me in the rearview mirror.

"Yeah. There's no telling what Seed's next move will be, or what he might pull. Since we know he's taken at least a little damage, now's our chance to take him down."

Ms. Fuubi wasn't here, and naturally, Siesta hadn't come back to life. To make matters worse, we'd lost Bat, our new ally. However, if we tried to make careful

plans, Seed would come up with another scheme, and any damage we'd managed to do today would be wasted.

"We'll finish Seed by ourselves. We'll wipe out SPES. We'll end it all today."

Siesta had said we were her last hope. We had to do this.

Today was going to be our final showdown with SPES.

"That's okay...right?" I turned to the other three. Come to think of it, I hadn't checked in with them about this.

"Of course." Saikawa twisted around, looking into the back seat. "As I said before, Kimizuka, I'm not your right arm, I'm your left eye! I'm sure the next thing this eye sees will be a perfect happy ending!"

"...That's great to hear."

Saikawa might be the youngest one here, but she was the most mature, and she always stuck with me. After learning what had happened between her parents and SPES, she'd overcome her inner conflict, choosing the future over the past. If that future was going to be a bright one, we couldn't afford to lose this fight.

"I was planning to do that all along anyway," Charlie said, without looking back at us. "That's why I came in a car I'd loaded up with weapons."

"Talk about well-prepared. You must've gotten that from Siesta."

When Charlie said she'd been planning to do this all along, she definitely didn't mean she'd always been on my side. For Charlie and me, though, that was fine. We never got along, but even if we stayed on parallel rails the whole time, as long as we were heading in the same direction, that was enough. As progress went, it was plenty.

"What about you? Are you okay with this?" Finally, I turned to Natsunagi, who was with me in the back seat.

"Hmm, well, let's see..."

...I hadn't been expecting that reaction. Natsunagi stretched, seeming to think for a while.

“As long as you swear not to die, I guess it’s fine.”

She turned an oddly mature smile on me.

“All right. In exchange, if I make it through this alive, you have to do what I tell you one time,” I joked. The death flag was intentional. When they’re this obvious, they do a quick-change into survival flags.

“Coming from you, that’s scary, Kimizuka... What exactly are you planning to demand?”

“‘NC-17’ is too tame. Brace yourself for ‘NC-70’ or so.”

“What kind of adult fun time isn’t allowed until you’re seventy?!”

“A game of shogi and drinking tea on the veranda while surrounded by your grandkids, maybe?”

“That...actually *is* an adult game you can only play after you’re seventy. ... Huh? Wait, so you want us to be together even when we’re old? Was that an indirect proposal...?”

“Marry you, Natsunagi?Yeah, no.”

“It’s even worse when you refuse after thinking about it! I wasn’t even asking for you to propose in the first place!” Natsunagi shrieked, pummeling my shoulder.

Then I realized that Saikawa was staring dully at us in the rearview mirror. “Hmm? This lovers’ spat is even more rehearsed than your earlier ones. Something must have happened in London. Have you made each other into adults?”

“Seriously. What were you doing while we were working our butts off?” Even Charlie turned cold eyes on us.

...Sheesh. They don’t have a clue. We had it rough, too.

“Actually, forcing me to drive while you two make out back there is extremely annoying.”

“Haaah. Charlie, it looks as if you and I were never on Kimizuka’s list of targets to romance. We’re just sub-heroines.”

“Uh, I never wanted to be Kimizuka’s heroine in the first place.” Charlie rejected that idea firmly, with a straight face. “And I’ll defend that statement to the death.”

“Oh yes, come to think of it, that is true for you, Charlie. You and Nagisa are rather similar—the way you’re both aggressive, but a little weak when pushed—the difference is that you can’t stand Kimizuka, while Nagisa really loves him. Remembering that makes it nice and simple.”

“Yui, every so often you fling these incredible bombs without hesitating. I’m too scared to look at the backseat right now. I don’t even want to imagine what that remark did to the mood.”

“It’s fine, Charlie. When you’re in a romcom phase, the protagonists tend to develop hearing issues, so I’m sure they didn’t hear that remark, either.”

“Kimizuka! Your smartphone alarm is going off! It’s loud!”

“Oh, it’s still set to London time. Sorry... By the way, Saikawa, did you just try to tell us something?”

“No, nothing.”

“That was magnificent.”

For some reason, Saikawa and Charlie really seemed to be hitting it off, but that alarm had been so loud I couldn’t hear them. What had they been talking about, anyway?

“Are you sure it’s all right to be this relaxed, though?” Charlie sighed. She was probably concerned that we were acting so normal when we were headed into our final showdown.

“It’s fine. It was like this last time, too.”

This is probably the best approach for us. After all, before Siesta headed into her final battle a year ago, she thoroughly enjoyed her tea, the way she always did.

“Well, if you’re okay with it, then all right.” Charlie gave a fleeting, wry smile. “From this point on, though, no more jokes.”

The tension in her voice changed the mood.

According to Saikawa, Seed's jump should have taken him to this area.

"Over there!" Saikawa said, pointing. A big bridge crossed the ocean, and on it was a pileup involving several cars. Beyond the black smoke, right in the middle of the span, stood a swaying figure.

"Bat..."

The shape on the other side of the thick smoke belonged to a blond man in a suit. However, Seed was the one inside it...or so I thought. Then again, it was hard to imagine that Seed would wait for us here, without a plan. It was more likely that he'd discarded Bat, his temporary, nearly broken vessel.

"! What should we do? Yui, is Seed nearby?"

"At the moment, even my left eye can't see Seed. But he may have turned invisible, so I can't guarantee..." Saikawa's expression was grim.

"Let's get out. Charlie, stop the car."

Either way, we couldn't ignore Bat when he was like this. We got out of the car about ten meters in front of him. There was no one else on the bridge; maybe the monster had scared them off.

"Bat..."

I went closer, loading my gun on the way.

His right arm had been severed at the shoulder, and there were puncture wounds in his chest and stomach from Seed's tentacles. He was managing to stay on his feet somehow, but he staggered dramatically. His head was down. He didn't look at us.

"Kimizuka, be careful! Bat's not—!" Saikawa screamed. As she'd anticipated, the tentacle emerged from his right ear.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Bat bent backward, howling.

It was probably the seed going out of control; I'd seen this happen with Chameleon before, during the battle on the cruise ship.

Not only was he bloodied and bruised all over, but his body had been

commandeered as Seed's vessel and splashed with a lot of Seed's blood. As a result, the seed was devouring him from the inside out.

"I'll end it now." I walked toward Bat, keeping my eyes on him.

"Kimizuka." Natsunagi was watching me with worry.

Hey, it's fine.

Anyway, I have to be the one to do this.

It's not coincidence.

It's just that the word destiny doesn't suit whatever's between me and this guy.

So, yeah. This is probably just—history.

"This is the second time we've fought, Bat."

Then I turned my gun on the man who'd been my sworn enemy for four years.

◆ **Albert Coleman**

This is going to be one hell of a fight.

That was what I thought when I first took aim at my target. Except...

"Bat, you..."

Bat was no longer in any shape to actually fight. That missing arm made it hard to keep his balance, and he kept falling over. The tentacle that had grown from his ear lashed around weakly, but even without Charlie's agility, I managed to avoid it without trouble.

As a matter of fact, it actually made me hesitate to attack. The fight was so one-sided that I wondered whether I should just finish him off and be done with it. He'd already lost all sense of self. As my former enemy raged feebly, he seemed like one of Scarlet's undead.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

However, even that faltering battle was finally coming to an end.

Bat's eyes had rolled back in his head, and as he howled, rampaging tentacles burst out of *both his ears*. The sprouts swelled, their sharp points turning on me. All his remaining strength had to be concentrated in those. That meant this was the end. I fired bullets into the tentacles bearing down on me.

"...Gakh, ah!"

They burst, spraying fluid. With a short scream, Bat crumpled to his knees. Had I managed to destroy the seed inside him, too?

"Forgive me, Bat." I pointed my gun at the fallen man's head.

My former sworn enemy, whom I hadn't seen in four years.

In a way, the hijacking Bat had pulled that day was what had launched my journey through the extraordinary. If I was going to call meeting Siesta "destiny," then I really should call meeting him a "fateful connection."

However, that would end today, too.

I was going to end it with my own hands.

All I had to do was put a few hundred more grams of pressure behind this trigger—

"...Ha-ha. This's ironic."

"...!"

Just then, Bat slowly lifted his head. Destroying the seed seemed to have restored his awareness. He looked up at me with those sightless eyes, smiling faintly.



“Bat! Hang on, we’ll get you treated—”

“Hey, whoa, we were fighting to the death a second ago. Don’t go saying that now. You know there’s no way I’m surviving this,” Bat said, glancing at his bloodied body. He gave a sardonic smile. Cracks were beginning to appear in him here and there, as the price of being used as Seed’s vessel.

“I swear... I thought I’d died at the factory and made myself look awesome as hell, and here I am, a total train wreck.”

As Bat laughed at himself, I helped him over to the bridge railing and leaned him against it.

“! It’s okay, you don’t have to talk anymore.”

“Ha-ha! I’m on my way out. Let me talk all I want.” Even at a time like this, Bat joked around with that dark smile of his. “That said, my head’s not working so great. I’m pretty sure there was something I was supposed to tell you, but...” His body was crumbling away, starting from the cracks. “Ah, I would’ve liked a smoke before I died... Guess that’s not happening.”

With shaking fingertips, Bat tossed a bloody cigarette away. It must have gotten soaked during the fight. He’d never get that thing lit.

“Take this.”

Slim fingers held a cigarette out to him.

It was Charlotte Arisaka Anderson. She and the other two girls had watched our fight play out, and they’d come over to us before I noticed them.

“It belonged to that woman, though.”

I see. She’d swiped it from Ms. Fuubi. Yeah, I was just thinking she needed to knock off her “I’m quitting” scam.

“Well, that makes it even better. Ha-ha! I’ll smoke it for her.”

Bat put the cigarette between his lips, and Charlie lit it for him.

“—That’s good stuff,” he murmured, sounding as if he’d lost himself in it. He exhaled a big puff of smoke.

“There was something I wanted to make sure I told you.” Natsunagi stepped

in closer.

“Thank you for telling me who owned my heart.”

It had happened about a month ago, when Natsunagi and I had gone to the prison where Bat was being held. He’d used his augmented ears to uncover the fact that Natsunagi’s heart donor had been Siesta.

“On that day, my life began to move again. If I’d never learned about that, I couldn’t have faced my past. I wouldn’t have remembered anything. And so... Thank you,” Natsunagi said again.

“Ha-ha! I don’t remember living a life worthy of gratitude from anybody. Doesn’t feel too bad, though.” Bat’s eyes were vacant, but he gazed in Natsunagi’s direction anyway. “You and that heart carry out your mission,” he said, encouraging her in a steady, straightforward voice.

Natsunagi smiled back softly, then yielded her spot to me.

“...Oh, hey, that reminded me of what I needed to say.” Bat grabbed my shoulder with his one remaining hand. “Don’t you give up.”

He spoke as if he were entrusting something personal to me.

“I blew it. You can still make it, though. No matter what you sacrifice, no matter what price you pay, keep working to get that wish of yours. Don’t stop thinking. People are gonna warn you off, telling you not to go after forbidden fruit. They’ll laugh at you for taking the road through hell. But if that wish churning inside you is the real thing, if it’s something you want no matter what you have to put on the line—then cling to it. Grab it and hold on tight, Kimihiko Kimizuka.”

It was the first time Bat had ever said my name.

“—Yeah, I will.”

When he heard that, Bat grinned.

“Well, now. While we’ve been chatting, it looks like my time’s run out.” The cigarette slipped from Bat’s fingers. “I can’t tell whether I’m hot or cold, and it’s getting hard to hear. So this is death, huh?”

“! Bat. I... We swear we’ll take Seed down. So—”

“‘So rest in peace’? Wow, all this mercy from an enemy. Some top-class agent I am. Ha-ha!” Bat laughed the way he always did.

A girl knelt beside him.

“Bat...” Yui Saikawa squeezed Bat’s hand. Her eyes were filled with tears.

“Ha! What are you crying for, sapphire girl?”

“This happened because you protected me... Besides, there are things I still want you to teach me!”

“How many times are you gonna make me say it?” Although Bat’s words were harsh, he seemed to want Saikawa to understand. “I was just doing what I wanted to back there.”

This was a story I didn’t know, one that belonged to Bat and Saikawa alone. I was sure it was because they’d both been wrestling with the issue of revenge. Even if they’d come up with different answers, there was something the two of them had been able to share.

“One more piece of advice. When you point a gun at your enemy, don’t hesitate. Shoot them in the head. That’s an ironclad rule. Let’s see... When you get home today, I recommend eating pizza and watching a ton of zombie movies.”

Saikawa’s face had crumpled, and Bat gave her a little smile.

“I’ll remember...!” There were big tears running down Saikawa’s face now, and her voice was rising.

“Yeah, that’s right. All it takes to land you in big trouble is a moment’s hesitation, one little slip...”

“Not that! I meant *you*, Bat! I’ll always remember you!” Saikawa screamed.

Bat’s sightless eyes widened.

“Just like you remembered your little sister for twenty years, without forgetting her for a moment! Like I remember my parents every time I close my eyes! I’ll never forget you! My left eye will always, always remember what you looked like! And— I’ll— All four of us! We’ll always remember what you wanted to protect! And so—”

Saikawa's face was blotchy and swollen with tears, but even so, at the end, she smiled.

"And so please don't worry—Albert."

It was probably Bat's real name.

"—I see," Bat murmured, his voice coming out like a trickle now. Leaning against the railing, he raised a trembling hand to the sun.

"So feelings don't vanish?"

That's right. Even if your body gets destroyed, your feelings don't disappear.

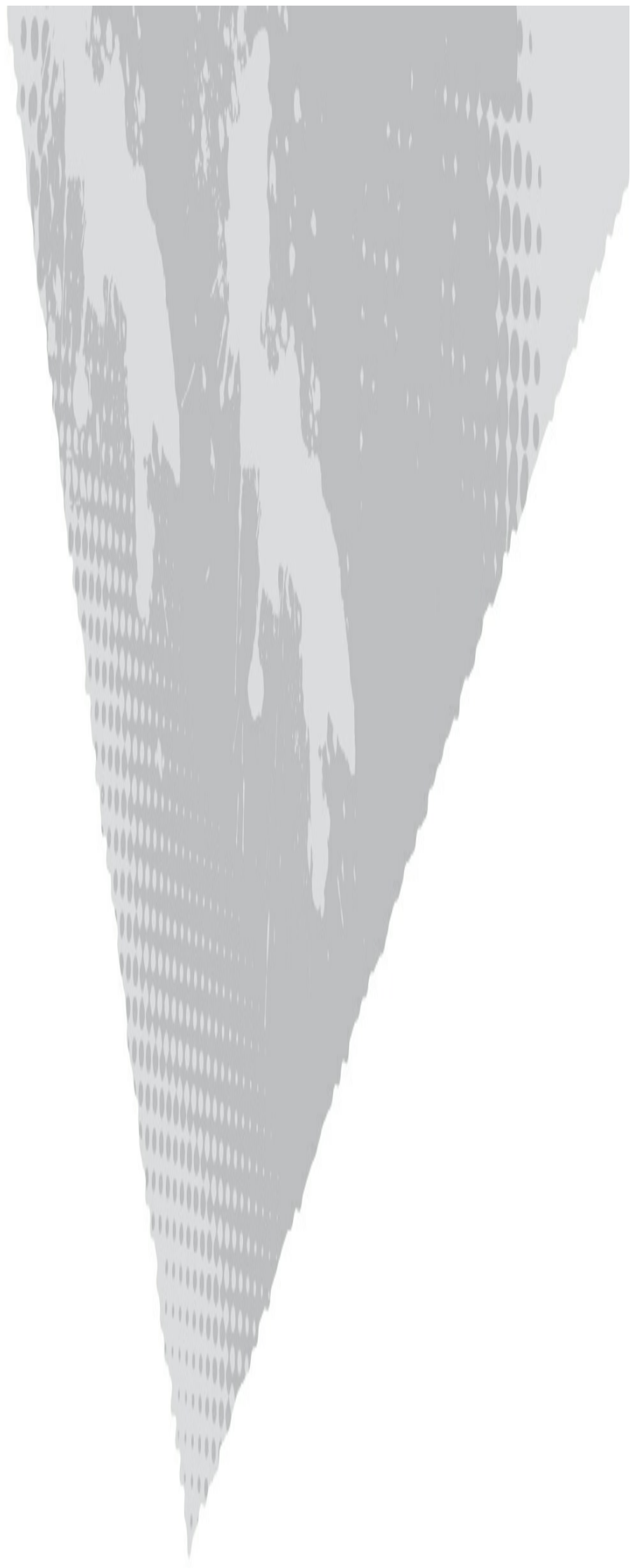
As long as somebody remembers it, your last wish will never die.

"Ha-ha. I didn't...know that. I'm glad I found out, before the end," he said.

His smile seemed boyish, as if the last twenty years had fallen away from him.

Then, drenched in sunlight, as if he could see someone beyond that light—Bat murmured his last words.

"I missed you, Ellie."



Chapter 6

◆ The final showdown

After we'd said our goodbyes to Bat, we got back into the car, and Charlie drove off in pursuit of Seed. We focused our search on places he was likely to flee to, such as buildings where the sun wouldn't reach him, then used Saikawa's left eye to efficiently eliminate possibilities.

Finally we reached a big, ruined shopping mall in the suburbs. They hadn't started demolishing it yet; the whole building was covered with vines, and it was dark enough inside that we had to use flashlights, even in the daytime. We walked through the structure, and finally, on the third floor of the parking garage—we found our target.

"...Kimizuka, be careful."

"I know. Natsunagi, you take care of Saikawa."

Since Saikawa was being targeted as Seed's vessel, I had her and Natsunagi fall back.

"Kimizuka... Let's watch zombie movies together after this, all right?"

"Yeah, sign me up for a Prime membership while we're here," I said, bantering with Saikawa.

...Then Charlie and I exchanged glances, and we turned to face Seed.

"So you're here."

The garage was littered with abandoned cars, and the enemy stood at the very back of it, a dozen meters ahead of us.

His long hair was a color that was hard to define, somewhere between gray and silver. His characterless, expressionless face seemed to transcend nationality and even gender; there was something that provoked awe about it, something almost holy.

The primordial seed could mimic the structure of the human body, and he seemed to be capable of replicating other organic matter to some extent: He'd cloaked himself in a substance that resembled thin armor. I could see cracks in his neck, though. They might be the aftereffects of his brief exposure to sunlight. His right ear was missing as well. Was there other damage hidden beneath that armor?

"Why do you expend this much energy in order to fight?"

I'd begun to reach toward my hip, but Seed's dark purple eyes pierced me.

"What reason is there for conflict? Think about it. Is it because I am what you refer to as your sworn enemy? Past enmity? The death of a member of your species? Because this is a suitable place to vent your grudge? Do you intend to take up weapons for such sentimental reasons? It's beyond comprehension," Seed said, in a voice that held no emotion at all.

"Then you're saying you don't want to fight?" Charlie narrowed her eyes, trying to figure out what the enemy was after. She kept her guard up, and her hand stayed on her sword's sheath.

"I never have. There's nothing more pointless than expending energy in futile conflict."

Siesta had written about that in her letter. Seed wasn't actively fond of fighting; he'd only used his subordinates to cause trouble in order to carry out his plan.

"Seed, what exactly are you?" I asked. It was an abstract question, but that had to be something we'd need to know. "All I know about you is that you're the seed of a plant that came from outer space, that sunlight is your mortal enemy, and that you're raising human vessels in order to eliminate its threat to you. That's all. What are you really, and why are you so fixated on your survival instinct that you'd invade us?"

I'm sure he was wondering why I was asking now, after all this. Even so, Seed said, "I made a forced landing on Earth a little more than fifty years ago."

Without showing any hostility, he began to relate his own history.

It was as if he was the one who was trying to settle things peacefully.

“As the primordial seed, I’d drifted through space in an outer shell capable of withstanding temperatures from absolute zero to ten thousand degrees Fahrenheit. At one point, a supernova occurred in a galaxy several tens of thousands of light-years away. The shock wave badly disrupted my control, and I crashed onto this planet.”

“So you were like a meteorite...?” I remembered the model of the primordial seed at the SPES lab. It had only been the size of a pebble. That was how this global crisis from outer space had descended to Earth, with nobody the wiser.

“I’d landed in a dark, cold, barren land that resembled a desert. It wasn’t long before a cold sensation told me that my outer shell had been damaged. It probably happened in the landing,” Seed went on. “Even so, I kept moving, drifting on the wind. Gradually, the temperature rose, my surroundings grew brighter—and that was when the trouble began.”

“The sun,” Charlie murmured quietly.

“I could feel my seeds rapidly withering. However, I was sure that if I could escape that barren land, I would be able to get away from the heat source, which was now high overhead. Shielding myself with what little remained of my outer shell, I rode the wind around the world.”

“...And then you realized there was nowhere on the planet to run?”

I was sure that was when his survival instinct had truly established itself.

“! Kimizuka, look,” Charlie said sharply. When I hastily focused on the enemy, I saw that the right ear Bat had risked his life to slice off was swelling back up, like bubbles rising to the surface of the water. Were his cells dividing and beginning to regenerate?

“Before long, I learned that the name of my enemy was ‘the sun.’ Little by little, I learned the mechanisms of this planet. The fact that it had ‘day’ and ‘night.’ That it was home to many diverse life-forms, such as wolves, bats, and chameleons. And that ‘humans’ stood at the apex of the ecosystem, as the rulers of this planet.”

...The rest probably matched what I’d read in Siesta’s letter, and what I’d seen and heard at the lab.

Seed had infiltrated the bodies of humans and animals, studying their structures. Then, as he collected samples, he'd learned to disguise himself as those creatures. That technique had led to the discovery of seeds that could enhance organs. He'd created clones from cuttings of himself. Humans had gathered, seeking the power of those seeds, and he'd consolidated both groups to form SPES.

Although Seed had hoped to conquer the sun by using a human body as a vessel, the primordial seed consumed the humans' nutrients, and his vessels promptly withered. In order to cultivate a vessel that was compatible with the seed, he created a test facility, disguising it as an orphanage, and had attempted to locate children like Natsunagi (Hel), Siesta, and Alicia.

"It has taken fifty years, but I thought I was about to fulfill my survival instinct at last," Seed murmured quietly, turning his eyes to some point in the distance. "However, for some reason, the future I thought I knew did not arrive. Two vessels were lost simultaneously, before my very eyes."

That was the plot Siesta had laid. She and Mia had set a trap and tricked him.

"So now let me ask you this."

The enemy's eyes returned to us.

"Why? Why would you go so far to obstruct me? What justifiable reason do you have to prevent me from following my instinct to survive? It isn't as if I intend to destroy the human race. Those who are unable to serve as my vessels may simply live on in areas where they don't get in my way. We should be able to segregate sufficiently... And yet you attempt to fight me. Why?"

Seed didn't necessarily want a war and was trying to find a compromise. That actually worked in our favor. Even if our opponent was damaged, and even if we had the advantage of numbers, this was someone that many Tuners had been unable to handle. If we fought him, there was no guarantee that we'd win.

"I understand what you're saying," I told Seed. I hadn't drawn my weapon. "We won't kill you. We won't even attack you. We don't plan to condemn your survival instinct, and if there's something you need to live, we'll help you as much as we can. However—"

For just a moment, I turned back, glancing at the girls who stood there. “We’re not giving you Yui Saikawa. We won’t let you sacrifice a single one of our friends.”

Siesta, Natsunagi, Charlie, or anybody else—I won’t let you use any of them as your vessel. Whatever happened, I couldn’t allow anyone to be sacrificed for the life of another. I wanted to tell the deceased Ace Detective the exact same thing.



“Oh, is that what this is about?” Seed murmured.

“I finally understand why such a fatal disconnect has occurred between myself and you humans.”

“...What do you mean? What are you trying to say?”

I had a bad feeling about this. Some sixth sense told me that the next thing he said would cause a decisive break between us. It was too late to head it off, though, as Seed plunged on.

“You humans fell from the apex of the ecosystem long ago, and yet you refuse to serve as the foundation of a higher species. That runs counter to the laws of the natural world.”

Seed was saying that just as mankind had survived by eating other animals, he’d satisfy his survival instinct by using humans as his vessels. His claim was that this was a new natural law.

“Do humans feel guilt when you eat a cow or pig or bird? Do you develop special feelings for each individual life-form? This is no different. I feel nothing about using your bodies as vessels.”

“.....!” Charlie sent him a sharp glare, and her hand tensed on her sword’s sheath.

“You’re saying you don’t even feel grateful to those who will make you what you are? You don’t care who they are or what they’re like?”

“Can you humans tell the face of one cow or pig from another?”

With his eyes wide open, Seed tilted his head in an exaggerated way. His neck cracked audibly.

“...Oh, I see.”

Finally, I understood.

Seed wasn’t talking to individuals, to Kimihiko Kimizuka and Charlotte Arisaka Anderson. Just as humans couldn’t tell the ants who swarmed at their feet apart, Seed was aware of us only as “humans” in general.

For example, when Hel had run away last year in London, the clone Chameleon had a hard time finding her. Although they'd worked together closely for years as members of SPES, when he'd met Natsunagi again on that cruise ship, he hadn't realized who she was.

Unsurprisingly, his parent Seed didn't normally see humans as individuals, either. The only thing he paid attention to was whether the subject in front of him was a defective variant in terms of becoming his vessel.

"Now do you understand, humans?" Without even blinking, Seed *gazed at the four of us as a unit*. "This isn't a matter of good or evil. It's a logical conclusion about the shape nature should take."

In the truest sense of the word, Seed wasn't looking at anyone.

I asked him one final question. "What if we say we'll resist anyway?"

"Humans show their livestock no mercy, either."

He's right. I can't deny that.

I drew my Magnum, pointing it at the enemy. "I see. Here's the thing, though: Humans are really bad at knowing when to give up."

◆ The end of Route X

Tentacles sprouted from Seed's back, their pointed tips turned toward us.

Our enemy's face was still blank. As he'd said, he wouldn't waste energy attacking first. When it came to striking back, though, I was sure he wouldn't hesitate.

"Natsunagi and Saikawa, shelter behind the pillars!" I called over my shoulder. Then Charlie and I stepped forward.

"What's our plan?" Charlie glanced at me.

"Same as always."

"Meaning we don't have one. Right."

Even as we prepared for battle, we joked with each other. Except for that blank year, this was how we'd always done things.

“Do you think she’ll say I did well?” Charlie’s murmur sounded just a little younger than usual.

I didn’t have to ask who “she” was. Charlie was always focused on the great Ace Detective, a girl who’d let her back do all the talking.

“I think I was jealous of you, Kimizuka.” Without sparing me so much as a look, Charlie darted toward the enemy. I tightened my grip on my gun and we split up, running at Seed from different directions.

“I ran after Ma’am, and you walked beside her, Kimizuka,” said Charlie. “I got the feeling we’d never be equal as long as I lived...and I envied you. But...I realized it was all right that way. After all...” The agent sprinted across the battlefield, evading the tentacles that closed in on her, her blond ponytail flying. “As long as I was a step behind Ma’am, I could guard her back!” she shouted.

Then her golden sword slashed through the incoming tentacles. She took a big step toward the enemy, and—

“—! Stop!”

Behind us, Saikawa screamed. Her left eye must have picked up on something. Just then, a violent tremor hit, jolting us vertically and side to side all at once.

“...! An earthquake?” Charlie stopped in her tracks.

No. This was no earthquake. This was—

“Surface of the Planet Exploding Seeds— My seeds have already been sown across this world.”

As Seed spoke, countless *briars* grew out of the floor and walls of the parking garage. The building had been under his control all along.

“...Dammit!”

The brambles tangled around me. I shot through them, but there was no end to them. Swarms of briars were targeting Saikawa and Natsunagi as well. Natsunagi had her musket, and she was managing to deal with them somehow. Saikawa wasn’t good with weapons, though, and the thorny plants surrounded her easily.

“Yui!”

Charlie, who’d freed herself faster than any of us, headed to Saikawa. Her golden sword mowed down briars right and left, almost in a dance; when she’d cut them all down, Charlie reached in to help the other girl—but that’s when it happened.

“! No, Charlie, don’t!”

Saikawa had seen something else with that left eye and shoved Charlie away. And then.

“_____!”

One of Seed’s tentacles darted out of a blind spot and grazed her neck.

“Saikawa!”

From this distance, I couldn’t tell how deep that wound was, but its location couldn’t have been worse. Bright blood flowed from the right side of her neck.

“...Huh? That’s weird. I managed to save Bat that way once.” Saikawa had a hand to her neck. Her face was pale, but she still tried to force a smile. Her left eye could read combat better than any of us...but that didn’t mean she could physically keep up.

“Yui...!”

Just as Charlie tried to run to her again, the floor around Saikawa crumbled away. A massive tangle of briars shot up from the floor below, swallowing her, and she vanished before she could say a word.

“Saikawa...!”

“Yui!”

My voice and Natsunagi’s overlapped...but there was no way for us to reach our friend now.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Charlie was the first one to act. She ran at Seed, her blond hair disheveled.

“You said that vessel was your friend? It’s incredible that you’d call yourselves ‘friends’ when you can’t protect her properly.”

Apparently, Seed hadn't intended to hurt Saikawa, either. He turned cold eyes on Charlie. Then a tentacle that grew from a spot near his spine turned silver, like steel, and countered the golden blade Charlie swung at him. The result was —

“.....Oh.”

The next thing I knew, Charlie was in the air.

I heard her sword snap, and then a duller crunch. A brief sob escaped her, the steel tentacle wrapped around her waist like a whip, and—

“Humans really are fragile.”

He flung her through the plants that covered the building and out of the parking garage.

“...How far is it from here to the ground?” I felt myself break out in full-body goose bumps as my blood ran cold.

If she slammed into the ground from a height like this, while she couldn't even attempt to break her fall, Charlie would—

“Natsunagi! Go after her!”

The only words that came out of my mouth were predictable. I didn't even know whether I was talking about Saikawa or Charlie. I just tagged the Ace Detective with the simple, all-important request to save our friends. In exchange—

“Seed!”

Without waiting for Natsunagi's response, I charged Seed alone, Magnum in hand. Thanks to Charlie, all the briars that had blocked the way were gone.

“Two to go, hmm?”

Tentacles swarmed from Seed's back, reaching for me.

Draw on all your past experience, limit yourself to lethal attacks, drill the enemy in the throat with your bullets. That was all I needed to do right now.

I felt no pain. Compared to the pain of losing somebody precious, this was nothing. With Seed right in front of me and my black gun in my right hand, I—

“Yes. That is what it means to hone one’s survival instinct.”

By the time I heard the enemy say that, I was already lying on cold concrete. Wait, was it the floor that was cold, or was it me? I must have taken a solid hit from one of those tentacles; my body wasn’t moving well. Had he hit me in a bad spot, or was it because I’d lost too much blood?

“It doesn’t matter.”

Nothing was going to happen if I didn’t get back on my feet. Then I had to take another run at the primordial seed and destroy it. Even if my body was heavy as lead, I had to move, right now.

“—Move.”

I knew that.

I *knew*, but my body wouldn’t listen to me anymore. I didn’t even feel anxious about it now. That was how hazy my mind had gone.

This was where my story would end.

I wouldn’t defeat Seed and wipe out SPES, and I’d never find a future where I reclaimed my dearest partner. I didn’t have the strength left to flip this reality in my favor.

“—So this is it, huh?”

Realizing I was about to die, *I got back up*.

For the first time, Seed’s expression twisted slightly.

How was I still able to stand? Even I didn’t know. Had swallowing that seed given me astonishing physical powers and recovery abilities? Or had standing on the brink of death simply flooded me with adrenaline?

Or maybe...

“Is it because Siesta promised?”

She’d never let me see her cry. Even so, with tears streaming down her face, she’d sworn she’d come see me again someday. Until I truly reunited with Siesta, I wasn’t allowed to die.

“That’s my survival instinct.”

With trembling hands, I aimed my gun at the enemy.

“It’s all right.”

Just then, a gentle sensation enfolded my back.

I didn’t even need to look to know it was Natsunagi.

Nagisa Natsunagi was hugging me from behind.

“There’s something you have to do, Kimizuka. Remember? So *sleep for a little while.*”

Her soft voice soaked into my brain like hypnosis. I struggled to respond, but my eyelids were growing heavy, and they wouldn’t let me.

“Natsu...nagi...”

I crumpled to the pavement. Just before I fell asleep—I heard the girl with blazing red eyes make a declaration to the supervillain.

“I, the Ace Detective, will defeat this enemy of the world.”



◇ Proxy detective: Nagisa Natsunagi

“That personality is able to make full use of my seed?”

Seed, who was standing just up ahead, looked down at me coldly. He’d realized I’d used Hel’s word-soul power.

“So you can tell *me* apart, then.”

Was it because this body was a vessel he’d put a lot of personal time and effort into raising? In that case, he might really resent me for being defective... Well. Not that that had anything to do with anything at this point. I’d be fighting this man either way. After one final look at Kimizuka’s sleeping face, I turned my back on him and straightened up.

“Where did you take Yui?”

“Making her into a proper vessel will require preparations.”

Seed didn’t give me a direct answer. However, it did sound as if Yui was still alive somewhere. If Seed planned to use her as his vessel, he couldn’t let her body die—which meant we could still save her.

“Do you intend to obstruct me as well?” Seed asked dispassionately. He’d seen my grip tighten on the musket. “I’m aware that two additional identities sleep inside you. Do you mean to fight without their aid?”

He meant Hel and Siesta. Those two had originally been Seed’s best candidate vessels. However, their minds had been condensed into one body, thanks to Siesta—and Seed had lost both of them at once.

Since Hel and Siesta’s strong personalities already lay dormant in this body, if he tried to take it by force, *I*—the outer vessel—would probably shatter. Knowing this, Seed had given up on making this body his vessel. Which was why —

“Yes, I’ll be the one to fight you. After all, if I switched with Hel now, you’d try to take this body again, wouldn’t you?”

The fact that Hel and Siesta’s powerful minds were dormant inside me was what made it possible to keep Seed out. I was sure I wouldn’t be able to fill that

role. I'd just have to protect this body *from the outside*.

"Even if it gives you a disadvantage in combat, even if you risk death, you'll never become my vessel. Is that what you're saying?"

No matter what, we couldn't let Seed acquire a vessel. If he conquered the sun, the one weakness we knew about, our chances of defeating him would be nearly nonexistent. That meant I couldn't let him steal this body here. —But.

"You have the wrong idea about one thing."

As I spoke, I smiled.

Even at a time like this, that was what the Ace Detective would have done.

"I won't let you make me your vessel, but I don't have the slightest intention of dying, either."

Then I pointed my musket at Seed and pulled the trigger. Predictably, the enemy's tentacles blocked the bullet before it reached him. —But that was exactly what I'd wanted.

"Now your tentacles can never attack me again."

It was the *red bullet* Siesta had used long ago, the type she'd put her blood into. Anyone shot with those was unable to defy their master. Now Seed couldn't attack me—or Siesta's heart inside me.

"I see. After I defeated that creature, it learned a trick like that?" Seed temporarily lowered the tentacles that extended from his back. "However, I originally created that system by recombining genetics, in order to prevent conflict with my own kind. There are any number of ways to counter it."

Seed sent a tentacle speeding *toward a spot above my head*.

".....!"

The attack struck the ceiling, and a big fluorescent light fell toward me. I managed to dodge it, but shards of broken glass stabbed my legs.

"...So you'll just aim at other objects, not at me."

Seed was planning to attack me indirectly.

"As a rule, I prefer not to waste energy. However, I've just secured a new

vessel. I'll do my duty as a parent and prune the defective variants before I go," he said indifferently.

Then he sprouted four tentacles from his back. They struck at the walls and ceiling around me, undulating as if they had wills of their own.

"—Just you try and hit me," I hissed, dodging falling fluorescent lights and flying pillar fragments. Maybe it was because Hel had used this body for several years, or maybe she was fighting alongside me even now; I kept evading the enemy's attacks with moves I was sure no normal human could pull off.

"This is for Charlie."

Using the clouds of dust as cover, I slipped through his attacks and fired a bullet. It struck Seed's shoulder squarely, and a green fluid spurted out... But even then, his expression didn't flicker. He tilted his head at an unnatural angle.

"You're avenging the death of your fellow human?"

"It would take more than that to kill Charlie." I leaned against a pillar, catching my breath. "Speaking of vengeance, though..."

I loaded the next attack into the musket; it had been modified to be easier to load than normal. "I'll give you back the pain Alicia felt."

Crouching low again, I raced toward the enemy.

"Fundamentally, then, your actions are based in sentiment?"

"...Ow.....!"

The next thing I knew, *briars* had grown thickly under me, their thorns stabbing into my feet. While I was pinned down, the enemy's tentacles grabbed a nearby abandoned car and hurled it at me.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

I shot through the brambles at my feet, freeing myself, and then—

"*Move, feet!*"

Using word-soul to give myself an order, I forced my bloody feet into motion. The enormous hunk of metal missed me by a hair.

Immediately after that, there was an explosion. The car had been dashed into

the wall, and as it crumpled, gasoline leaked out and ignited. The parking garage was overgrown with plants, and in moments, the whole place was in flames.

“...! Who cares?” I wiped away the sweat and blood that ran down my forehead, then loaded my gun again. These were the last of my bullets.

How could I beat him? Up until now, I’d used the surge of passion inside me as my weapon. Kimizuka had counted on my emotions, too. It wouldn’t matter what sort of appeal I made to this enemy, though. He didn’t even understand the concept of feelings. What could I do against an opponent like that?

“Let me ask you one more time.” Just then, as if he’d read my mind, Seed spoke to me coldly on that fiery battlefield. “Why do you humans put so much stock in emotions? Sometimes you choose actions based in emotion over your own survival instinct, even though that should be the most fundamental desire of any living creature.”

He didn’t even blink, and he wasn’t asking out of idle curiosity. Seed was asking me, a human, a question he must have had ever since he fell to this planet.

“—So you didn’t notice.”

Even though he’d had loads of chances.

I bit my lip, standing in the flames, and then I shouted at Seed. “Alicia tried to protect Siesta and me, ignoring the danger to herself—that’s friendship! Hel always stayed close to you and did her very best at everything—that’s sadness! Yui thought of her parents, and her parents constantly put their only daughter first—that’s love! Charlie inherited Siesta’s last wish after she died and kept carrying out missions all on her own—that’s dedication! Albert risked every facet of his own life to save his little sister—that’s devotion! Siesta died, entrusting everything to Kimizuka, to me, and to her friends—that’s passion! All of that— They’re all human emotions. Having them is what makes us human!”

Right now, that was the very best answer I could give.

“I see. I didn’t understand that in the slightest. It’s probably similar to the way humans can’t perceive insect calls as intelligible speech.”

In the midst of the flames, Seed's expression didn't change.

"All right. *I've finished recombining my genes.* I should be able to attack you now."

Even as we fought, Seed had been manipulating his DNA. The tips of his tentacles turned toward me again. Right behind me, Kimizuka lay on the floor, fast asleep. I couldn't run.

".....!"

A minute ago, there was just one person I hadn't told Seed about.

My partner and assistant—Kimihiro Kimizuka.

Siesta was more precious to him than anyone else, and he was trying to get her back, even if it meant walking into territory that was taboo to humans. It hadn't seemed right for me to say what sort of emotion that was, here and now. The word that best describes it may not even exist.

That meant Kimizuka would have to find the answer on his own someday. He might resort to forbidden methods and make the whole world his enemy, maybe even end up fighting the Tuners—but he would regain Siesta. He'd get her back someday for sure. I knew he would. After all, *I'd already found the route that led to that future.*

"Are you sure that's okay?"

Out of nowhere, I felt as if a voice had echoed in my mind.

It was the question I'd been asked two days ago, at the top of the highest clock tower in England, by a girl who could see the future.

After she'd made Kimizuka leave and it was just the two of us, she told me about the *distortion* that would result if we overturned a predetermined future, attempting the taboo of resurrecting the dead.

Just as there could only ever be one person in the world with the gifts of an Oracle, it was possible that the world would only allow one Ace Detective. So if we created a future where Siesta came back to life, I'd be—

"Yes, it's fine."

Back then, I hadn't been able to respond to the question immediately, but I had an answer now.

"I mean, it's true, isn't it?"

The role I'd been given.

The mission I had to carry out here and now.

"—I'm the proxy detective."

I'd decided as much a year ago.

".....!"

The next moment, Seed's tentacle ran through my stomach.

".....gk, ah,kh!"

Pain fiercer than anything I'd ever felt broke over me, and I almost blacked out. When the tentacle retracted, deep-red blood fell in large, noisy spatters. That wound was probably going to be fatal.

—Even so.

"Run, legs!"

Using my word-soul power one more time, I gave myself a firm order.

Run, run.

The pain doesn't matter. Forget about everything except going forward.

"Maybe I'm no match for you!"

I'd spent all my time in a hospital bed, and I hadn't even been able to sprint a hundred meters. Now I had legs that could run, and a reason I needed to. I wouldn't stop.

"But someday, someone will cut you down!"

Facing forward, mustering my last strength, I swore that oath to the enemy of the world. Then, hiding myself in the black smoke and the flames, I crept up on him. I was holding not the musket, but *my other weapon*.

"Maybe the idol from Japon will talk you down with a song, or the blond agent will dominate you with her fighting skills!"

It was one of my other partner's favorite swords; I'd found it at the test facility just before we left the SPES hideout yesterday. *Lend me strength*, I prayed, then squeezed its hilt tightly.

"Or maybe a bland-looking boy in a jacket will change your mind with his clumsy words, or maybe a white-haired Ace Detective will demolish you with an ingenious scheme no one else could ever think up!"

Two meters left between me and the enemy. As I burst out of the black smoke with Hel's borrowed strength—I swung the red saber at my enemy's neck.

"I won't get to see that future play out—but I can say this much! There will never be a future where you rule this planet and conquer mankind!"

At the end of my final battle, what I'd accomplished was...

"...Not enough, huh?"

With just a few centimeters left before it severed my enemy's head, the red saber had been blocked by a tentacle shaped like a sword. —And then.

"You too, Hel?"

As my consciousness faded, I heard Seed whisper those words, very faintly.

"We're about to be interrupted," he said. Almost immediately, I caught the distant pulse of a helicopter. It was reinforcements—and, since Seed had already achieved his main objective and secured a vessel, he simply vanished.

"...I guess this is it."

Apparently, I couldn't trick my brain with word-soul any longer. I tottered, then crumpled to the ground.

"Kimi...zuka..."

In the midst of the blazing flames, I crawled toward Kimizuka's prone body.

There wasn't much oxygen. I'd lost too much blood. My grip on my consciousness was slipping, and I couldn't seem to get enough air. Even so, I stretched my hand, my fingertips, toward him.

"Tha...nk..."

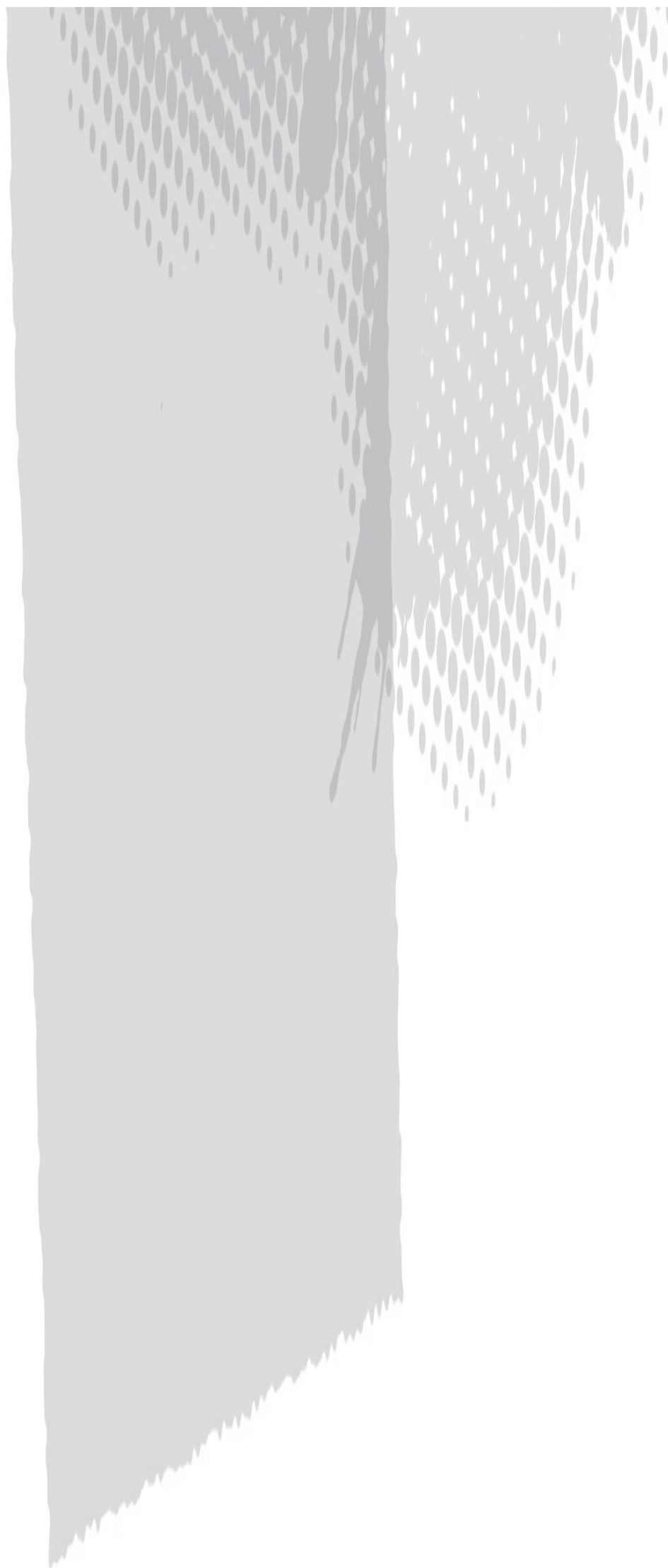
I couldn't finish the sentence.

However, at the end, I'd managed to do what I'd always dreamed of: I'd become somebody. Feeling just a little satisfied, I fell asleep.

My name is Nagisa.

Nagisa Natsunagi, proxy detective.

My last wish kept the detective's mission from dying out, and it will be inherited by the next person to fight.



Epilogue

When I opened my eyes, I saw a white ceiling.

My nose caught the smell of chemicals. I ached all over. It didn't take me long to register that this was a hospital.

"So you're awake, huh?"

A little ways from the bed, I heard a woman's low voice. When I turned my head, my eyes found a familiar redheaded police officer. Fuubi Kase was peeling a piece of fruit.

"Want an apple?"

"...That's an assassin for you. Put a knife in your hand and the results are first-class," I muttered. I was gazing at the extraordinarily thin ribbon of skin from that perfectly peeled apple. "And? How long was I out?"

I couldn't see any sunlight around the edges of the curtain. That meant it had been at least half a day.

"Mm, about forty hours," Ms. Fuubi said, glancing at her watch. Apparently, I'd slacked off even longer than I'd figured.

"Well, you woke up earlier than the former Ace Detective," she said, then admonished me to stay in bed.

"...So, Ms. Fuubi. Why are you here?"

She started to get out a cigarette...then put it back in the carton. Was she hesitant to smoke in a hospital room, or was this...?

"There are three things I need to tell you."

I could feel Ms. Fuubi's eyes on me, but as she began to fill me in, I gazed at the ceiling.

"First: Charlotte Arisaka Anderson is in the ICU, unconscious."

During that showdown at the abandoned building, Seed had hurled Charlie

out of a three-story parking garage. She probably hadn't been conscious when she hit the ground; she couldn't do anything to break her fall. The fact that she was alive at all was practically a miracle.

"What's her current condition?"

"No idea. I'm not a doctor," Ms. Fuubi said. I'd heard her say that before. "Now everything depends on how strong her will is."

She didn't clarify what she meant by "will." When I thought of what Charlie wanted most right now, though, I didn't even need to ask.

"Second: We believe Seed has Yui Saikawa."

During that showdown, briars had attacked out of nowhere. They'd swallowed Saikawa, and she'd vanished.

"Is she all right? Where is she now?"

Seed was planning to use Saikawa as his vessel. That meant he wouldn't kill her. But if he'd already taken over her body...

"I'm using everything I've got to search for her. At this point, though, Seed isn't making any obvious moves."

"...On the other hand, that's no guarantee that Saikawa is safe."

We had to figure out a way to rescue her, fast, before it really was too late.

"So, Ms. Fuubi." I sat up in bed.

"Where is Natsunagi?"

She'd told me about Charlotte and Saikawa, so Natsunagi was the only one left.

She had gone into battle against Seed on her own, in my place— "I was wrong. She was a detective," Ms. Fuubi murmured.

"She was willing to make any sacrifice to carry out her duty. She inherited that *spirit of self-sacrifice* from the former Ace Detective. In both name and deed, she was—"

The next moment, Ms. Fuubi's face was right in front of me.

“What’s the point of hitting me?” she asked.

I’d thrown off the covers and grabbed her before I was even aware of it.

I knew.

I didn’t need anybody to tell me it was pointless.

I just didn’t want to hear *that one final word* from anybody.

“Save that punch for the person you really need to give it to.”

Gently, Ms. Fuubi removed my hand from her shirtfront. Then she walked out of the hospital room without another word.

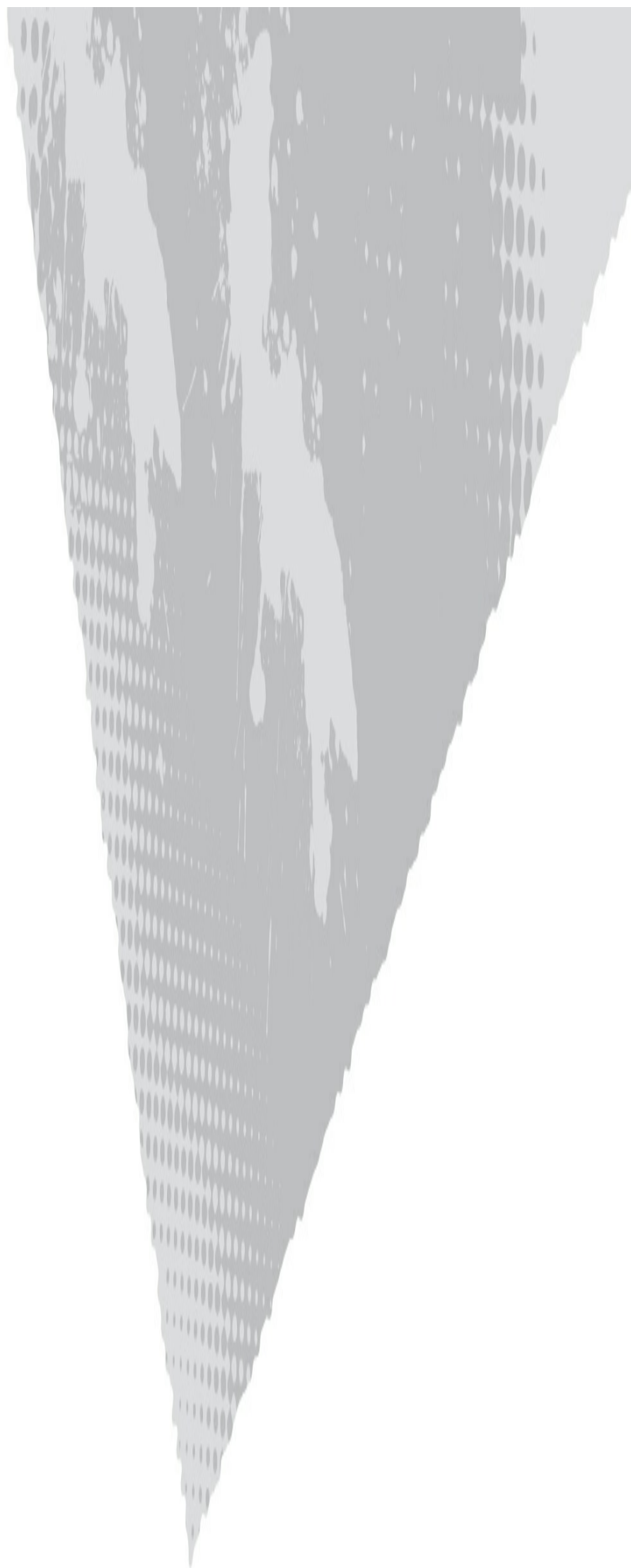
I just stood there.

I knew already, really.

I was just scared to admit it.

“Natsunagi is...”

The detective was already dead.



Re:boot

Three days later.

My injuries had healed up unusually quickly, just like before, and the hospital had discharged me early.

Still, my left leg wasn't doing great, and I couldn't handle much walking around. Once I got back to my apartment, I didn't do anything in particular. I'd left my futon out, and I just lay on it, aimlessly staring at the TV. At school, summer term would be underway, but of course I didn't feel like going.

"This again, huh?"

Déjà vu. One year ago, just after I'd lost Siesta, the days had bled away like this. After a week, or maybe a month, I'd gone back to school, and my life had fallen into its tepid routine.

Right now, I couldn't even soak in that lukewarm water. I felt like I was lying in an ice-cold bath. Some foreign drama had been on the TV for a while now, but my brain wasn't picking up any of the plot. What time slot did they show foreign dramas in anyway, and on what day?

The curtains were closed, so my sense of time was totally shot. It felt like it had been three days since I had learned what I had learned, but I wasn't sure. I'd dozed briefly three times since I'd come home, that was all.

"—My phone."

I'd left it by my pillow. I tried to check the time on it, but the battery was dead. Ms. Fuubi was supposed to send word if anything happened with Charlie or Saikawa, but so far, no one had called.

In search of another way to locate Saikawa, I'd gotten in touch with a certain person...but there hadn't been any good news from that quarter, either.

In other words, I'd failed at everything.

Charlie was hanging between life and death because of me, and I hadn't been

able to protect Saikawa from the enemy. I'd broken that promise I'd made with Hel, the one about not making Natsunagi cry, and I...

"I'm hungry."

The fact that my stomach could still growl at a time like this seemed like a design flaw. I unsteadily got to my feet. Come to think of it, aside from water, I hadn't put a thing in my mouth since I got back.

I opened the fridge; it was empty. I wasn't up to going out, either mentally or physically, so I checked the entryway mailbox, hoping for some takeout flyers.

Inside, I found the usual:

Several notices about unpaid utility bills.

The exact sort of pizza delivery flyer I was after.

And—one letter with no address.

Sender unknown.

I had no idea what this was, but since someone had put it in my mailbox, it seemed safe to assume it was for me.

Strangely, before paying my electricity bill, before calling in a pizza order, I felt like I had to read that letter. When I opened the envelope, I found two small sheets of paper.

"This...is..."

The letter began with "To Kimizuka."

"If you're reading this letter, it means I'm not with you anymore."

"—That sounds like a movie cliché. I never thought I'd be saying something like that. The thing is, I've got a bit of a hunch... Well, to be more precise, I've made up my mind. Siesta left you a letter, too; I'm not trying to copy her, but I'm also writing this at the apartment in London, while I watch you sleep. I do need just a little courage, so to tell you the truth, I had a bit to drink before I came here... I wonder if you noticed."

"So, I'm planning to give this letter to a certain cabin attendant, with instructions to give it to you if anything happens to me. Did you get it? Oh, but if

you're reading it now, it must've worked out. Okay, good."

"I've never written a letter before, so I'm not actually sure what I should write first. To start with, I guess I'll make like a detective and do a little deducing."

"—Right now, Kimizuka, you're starving!"

"Well? I'm right, aren't I?"

"According to my eerily accurate deduction, our sudden parting has left you massively depressed. You've been holed up in your apartment for days, all alone, but you're going to have to eat something soon...and so you were dragging yourself outside when you noticed this letter. Yes, that feels like a solid prediction... What? You say you aren't that depressed?"

"That's incredibly annoying! Double-kill!"

"...Kidding. Actually, I'm a little uneasy."

"I mean, it seems like Siesta's really all you see. It makes me wonder if you might not feel all that sad no matter what happens to me. Well, I'll never know what happened now... Even so, I think I'd like it if you cried a little."

"Um, actually, let me take that back. I just sounded super needy. 'As long as you're fine, Kimizuka, that's enough for me!' Yes, that should do nicely."

"Getting down to business, then."

"First, I have a request for you."

"If you haven't managed to defeat Seed by the time you read this letter—I want you to personally take him down someday. No matter what. To tell you the truth, I've got a secret plan of my own...but there's no guarantee we'll be able to win that way. Even if I'm not there, you have lots of other friends you can count on, so I'm counting on you!"

"Next, an apology."

"It's been a while now, but do you remember that promise I made you?"

"I said no matter what happened, I wouldn't die and leave you behind."

"I'm sorry. I wasn't able to keep that promise... Are you mad?"

"I hope so... Just kidding."

“Finally, thank you.”

“Thanks for all the times you helped me.”

“A year ago, in London. Thank you for being kind to me, when I’d lost my memories. Thank you for putting that ring on my finger. Thank you for coming to save me, even when I’d been taken to the enemy’s hideout.”

“There’s a whole lot more. You found the owner of my heart for me. You told me it was okay to live my own life. You rescued me from the enemy on that cruise ship. You forgave the crimes I’d committed. You encouraged me up on the roof that night. You said you’d have my back, and you’ve stayed with me all this time. Thank you.”

“You gave me so much. Have I managed to repay even a little of it? I’m sure I’ve barely scratched the surface... I really would have liked to stay with you a bit longer. Not that I’m confessing my love for you or anything. Seriously, Kimizuka, you don’t mean a thing to me.”

“...That said, I don’t know what you thought of me, but I didn’t dislike you. There was no way I could. If this turns out to be goodbye, it’s going to make me a little sad. —Still, as the detective, I’ll complete my final job.”

“When I do, I hope you’ll praise me a little.”

That was where the letter ended.

“...What the hell.”

It was all wrong.

Everything Natsunagi had said was wrong.

I won’t get depressed if you’re not there?

I haven’t been able to move for three days. Just look at me.

I didn’t have the energy to eat, I hadn’t bathed, and my facial hair was growing in. Even now, I didn’t want anything. I was just sitting there, on the floor, reading that letter. Why hadn’t that gotten through to her?

One month ago—you’re the one who pulled me out of that tepid routine. You held me close. When I tried to ignore Siesta’s feelings, you scolded me. You cried

in my place. On that pitch-black night, you swore you wouldn't leave me and die on your own. On the school roof, you said you'd be my friend. You stayed with me, all this time. I'm so— “Didn't I tell her any of that?”

I'd never properly thanked Natsunagi.

She'd thanked me—clumsily, sometimes blushing, sometimes getting mad—but I hadn't.

In the truest sense of the word, I hadn't managed to tell her a thing.

“Did I make the same mistake again?”

A year ago, death had parted me from Siesta before I could tell her anything.

“I am stupid.”

That same self-hating comment was an echo of last year. I was foolish. Pathetic. No matter how much I regretted it, though, it was too late. The detective was already— “.....gk!”

My hands clenched on the letter, crumpling it.

Then I realized there was something written on the back of the second sheet.

When I turned it over, it said “P.S.” and then:

“I forgot one thing! Don't think I'm the sort of girl who'd die for nothing, all right?”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

I couldn't figure that line out, and as I puzzled over it—a soft wind suddenly blew.

When had I opened a window?

I turned, trying to see where the breeze was coming from.

“This key is one of my Seven Tools. There's no lock it can't open.”

I should have been alone in the room, but a girl's voice spoke.

I'd heard that line before.

She'd gotten into my apartment without permission, then watched a foreign drama and eaten pizza as if she owned the place.

She was here now, right in front of me.

Her bobbed hair was pale silver, and her blue eyes pulled you right in. Her dress was a flattering color, apparently modeled on some country's military uniform, and the glimpses of skin I caught beneath it were as clear as snow.

She was as beautiful as an angel incarnate. If you looked up *beauty* in the dictionary, her name was bound to be there. If you ran a search of her name online, you can bet the related images would have been photos of flowers and birds and the moon.

Which was why all my interest just then was focused on her name.

Unlike four years ago, though, I knew that name—her code name.

“...Hey, that's trespassing.”

“Calm down. The only apartment I invade without asking is yours, Kimi.”

As she joked with me, just as she'd done on another day, she came closer.

“Say, Assistant.”

With a smile that was a hundred million watts of adorable, the white-haired girl softly held out her left hand to me.

“Let's go on a journey to save our friends again.”



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